

CARRY EACH OTHER'S BURDENS

*How Churches can
better support those serving
on the margins*

*By Laura Bagley
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THE CENTRE FOR
**THEOLOGY
& COMMUNITY**



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“Carry each other’s burdens”
(Galatians 6:2)

FOREWORD

We have, in our culture, come to understand Jesus as a religious figure rather than a political one. The reality however is that, for Jesus, these categories would make no sense; we cannot, if we are to follow Jesus, separate our faith from practical action to make our world a better place, a place of flourishing, of justice and of human prosperity. He was remarkable not only for his preaching but also for his practical action, healing, reconciling and simple conversation with those he met.

The adventure and the challenge of Christian faith is to risk going back into Jesus' world and Jesus' vision of God and God's kingdom. He proclaims in word and action good relationships, physical health, justice, sufficient material resources, making a meaningful contribution to society and being safe and secure. His method is inherently relational and presents the wellbeing of individuals, families, communities and societies as interdependent. Personal and social wellbeing for Jesus are not separable.

The last few years have seen the Church's ministry become more important to those in need in our communities. We live in times of great change; the state continues to withdraw from serving the needs of the poorest through austerity. We see a slowing of real economic prosperity which looks set to continue, and our political life is almost impossible to interpret. There are great challenges ahead. Of course, it's not for the Church to step into this space as a replacement, but rather to work out how it can respond in ways which remain true to its calling.

Laura sets out in this paper the challenges for the church as it responds to some of this complexity: how we encourage Christians into the adventure and challenges of faith at the edges of church life; how we respond to those we find in ways which help us better understand who we are as well as who we think they are; how we dismantle the barriers to inclusion that we construct to protect ourselves in the church; and finally how we support each other on the journey towards the kingdom.

That radical alternative of Jesus has a great deal to say into our world, but as with his ministry this is best heard when it is a practical response to the reality of real people and their lives. Words need to come second so that they come from a place of authenticity.

This reflective piece is a timely reminder of the contribution that we can make through our practical action, and how we can do that together.

Canon Paul Hackwood

Executive Director

Church Urban Fund



SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

This report seeks to explore how churches can support and equip their members whose work or ministry with those 'on the margins' takes place primarily outside of church walls. It asks how churches can more effectively foster, engage with and learn from what God is doing beyond their own immediate activities and programmes, through the day-to-day lives and callings of their members.

PART A – THE CHALLENGE

The report identifies four challenges for the Church.

CHALLENGE 1: RECOGNISING THE BREADTH OF LOCAL MISSION

Lay people serving those on the margins do not always feel positively affirmed, supported and released into their calling/ministry by the local churches they are involved in.

The question emerging from conversations around these issues is: 'How can local churches broaden their vision to include and embrace the wider work of the Spirit of God in and through all of their members even if it is beyond the church's own programmes?'

CHALLENGE 2: LOOKING IN THE MIRROR

Working alongside 'vulnerable' people often involves having to look in the mirror and see our own issues and vulnerabilities. If this is attended to, then 'the gift' can be learning to serve and love others from a healthier place, whilst owning and engaging with our own fragility and need for healing as part of the process.

The question emerging from these conversations is: 'How can local churches grow in depth, vulnerability and authenticity in order to avoid unhealthy work/ministry practices stemming from unrecognized personal issues and motivations such as co-dependency and 'rescuing' mentalities?'

CHALLENGE 3: INCLUDING THOSE WHO ARE 'DIFFERENT'

Our research suggests local churches often feel unprepared and ill equipped to embrace those on the margins, and can be experienced as inaccessible by vulnerable people. As a result, lay people who are walking alongside those on the margins can feel unsupported and isolated in their work.

The question emerging from these conversations is: 'How might churches become more aware of and better able to dismantle the barriers preventing those who feel 'different' or marginalized from integrating into the church family? How can the whole church community embrace vulnerable people, rather than expecting a few 'expert' individuals to make that journey alongside those on the margins in isolation?'

CHALLENGE 4: SUPPORTING WORKERS TO AVOID BURNOUT

Local churches are not always aware of and responsive to the support needs of lay people who are serving those on the margins, and the dangers of burnout that they are exposed to.

The question emerging from these conversations is: 'How can local churches work towards ensuring that individuals have the appropriate levels of support, training and pastoral care in place, in order that their work/ministry with those on the margins might become more sustainable and fruitful in the longer term?'

PART B – HOW THE CHURCH CAN RESPOND

CHALLENGE 1: RECOGNISING THE BREADTH OF LOCAL MISSION

Participants made some suggestions which may help local churches to more clearly 'see' and affirm the ministries of those who are called to walk alongside those on the margins:

- Acknowledging and affirming individuals in who they are and what their calling is within their church community.

- Giving church members opportunities to share about their work/ministry with the wider church community.
- Releasing individuals from duties and activities within the church that may lead to burnout and blessing them to pursue their particular calling.
- Incubating or supporting the start-up of new ministries and activities initiated by church members in the local community.

CHALLENGE 2: LOOKING IN THE MIRROR

Acknowledging and dealing with our own personal issues, as well as recognising that it is Christ – not us – who rescues and saves, are vital lessons that can be learnt from the experiences of lay people who are working with those on the margins and shared with the wider Church.

Church leaders can model good practice out of vulnerability through:

- Fostering a culture of openness about our need for personal healing.
- Acknowledging their own brokenness and pursuing personal wholeness.
- Offering help/support in this area to others in the church community.
- Gaining a better understanding of mental health issues.

CHALLENGE 3: INCLUDING THOSE WHO ARE 'DIFFERENT'

Local churches can seek to identify blind spots and work towards breaking down barriers that prevent those on the margins from being part of local churches through embracing vulnerable people as a whole community, rather than leaving it up to a small number of people who are seen as 'experts.' Some of the ways churches can move towards creating a more inclusive ethos include:

- Encouraging more church members to look out for and include vulnerable people who are visiting or part of the church.
- Encouraging more appropriate small groups in which people can belong.
- Making church services feel more accessible and making church accessible throughout the week, not just on Sundays.
- Modeling and encouraging inclusive hospitality e.g. families inviting people to join them for meals at home.
- Making relevant information and resources available to church

members to help them assist and respond to those who are more vulnerable.

- Offering training to help more church members to engage appropriately with vulnerable people, taking into account barriers such as language, culture, values etc.

A related issue that can prevent local churches from engaging well with those on the margins occurs when lay people involved in this work or ministry are 'elevated to sainthood.' Participants in this research suggested that church leaders and pastors could helpfully avoid and challenge this dynamic through:

- Knowing, affirming and supporting each member of the church in their callings and workplaces.
- Teaching and demonstrating that loving those 'on the margins' is a core part of us all responding to the Great Commission and learning to love our neighbours together as a church community.

CHALLENGE 4: SUPPORTING WORKERS TO AVOID BURNOUT

Participants acknowledged they do not expect their church community to provide all the support they need, and reflected on the importance of self-care alongside professional supervision where appropriate. However, there are various ways in which local churches might consider helping individuals to access support through:

- Pastoral care and prayer
- Training, supervision, resources and finance
- Awareness of individual needs/preferences

Finally, it is important for local churches to be able to acknowledge their limitations in capacity and focus. Churches and lay people walking with those on the margins can benefit their local communities deeply by looking for ways in which they can partner and share resources and ideas with others who are working towards the same goals.

PART C – CASE STUDY: SERVING VULNERABLE WOMEN IN EAST LONDON

As a practical case study, this section of the report considers how the learning described in parts A & B applies in the context of walking alongside vulnerable women in east London in particular.

A key learning point is that if we cannot name, own and engage in issues surrounded and ring-fenced by stigma and shame – particularly those relating to mental health and sexuality (such as pornography and prostitution) – then as individuals and church families we will be the poorer in terms of accessing deeper levels of personal and social wholeness and healing.

It is clear that where leaders and members of local churches are able to own and gain support around their own personal issues, overcome stigma and work towards dismantling barriers and embracing those on the margins, it is a major support to lay people who work with vulnerable people day to day. Furthermore, it is a step in the direction of increased wholeness within the body of Christ.

CONCLUSIONS

This research raises a number of challenges and suggested responses for local church leaders and members to consider, reflect on and - where appropriate - apply in their own context.

If we can support and learn from the experiences of church members who are walking closely with those on the margins in our local communities, then we believe the whole body can increase in fullness, depth and authenticity as together we learn what it really means to love our neighbours as ourselves.

A black and white photograph of two people sitting on a pier, looking out at the ocean under a cloudy sky. The person on the left is standing with hands on hips, while the person on the right is sitting. A small object, possibly a water bottle, sits on the pier between them. The sky is filled with dramatic, dark clouds.

**“THE CHALLENGE IS HOW
TO SUPPORT THOSE ‘OUT
THERE’ WHO ARE SERVING
WHERE THEY ARE.”**

INTRODUCTION

AIMS

At the heart of the Good News that is revealed in the life of Jesus, there is a clear bias towards and concern with 'the poor'. Jesus left no room for the church – His body - to ignore or neglect the place and needs of those who find themselves 'on the margins' of society or experiencing particular 'vulnerability' in this life. This was a clear priority for the early Church and must remain front and centre for the Church today:

"All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do."
(Galatians 2:10).

It is vital that local churches consider and grapple with what it means to be of, not just for, the poor, and to prioritise loving, supporting and including those who are particularly vulnerable at the heart of church life.

This report seeks to explore how churches can support and equip members whose work or ministry with people on the margins takes place primarily outside of church walls, in the context of their wider ministries and workplaces. It asks how churches can more effectively foster and engage with what God is doing beyond their own immediate activities and programmes, through the day-to-day lives and callings of their members.

I feel that we are good at supporting those who help with church activities, but the challenge is how to support those 'out there' who are serving where they are. We are less good at that.
Church Leader, Tower Hamlets

Avoiding burn out and keeping going is hard, so churches could ask 'How can we help you keep going' and respond to that.
Employee, Christian charity

This report reflects on the experiences of a wide range of paid and voluntary workers who are walking alongside people with particular

vulnerabilities. Experiences are drawn from people working in the NHS, drug/alcohol services, charities (faith and non-faith based) and missionary organisations. It also considers the perspectives of church leaders from different traditions.

The purpose of this report is to:

- Understand the experience of a range of Christians working with those on the margins in various contexts across London
- Reflect upon the work of those who are working with vulnerable women in east London in particular, as a case study
- Identify what lessons might be learnt about how churches can further equip and support members who are walking alongside vulnerable people in these contexts

It needs to be acknowledged that the language and terminology used in this report is inadequate at best. Referring to people as 'marginalised', 'on the margins' or 'vulnerable' can reinforce unhelpful labels and further entrench barriers. That is not the intention. This terminology is used with caution as a means of communicating the experience of walking alongside people who are facing complex challenges with which they need some particular support. In the words of one church leader:

We don't want vulnerable women to be seen as that (with a label), but to be part of the community.
Church Leader, Tower Hamlets

The experiences of those interviewed for this research speak clearly of a desire to get past barriers, labels and 'a hand-out mentality' in the pursuit of real relationship, although it is clear that this will look very different depending on the context and boundaries within which those relationships are found and held.

Much of the learning shared in this report may apply to a whole range of church members - not just those serving vulnerable people. However, this report reflects the experiences and expressed needs of people in this type of work or ministry specifically. This is not intended to sideline or devalue other forms of work or ministry that may be equally challenging.

OUR APPROACH

This report has been prepared by the Centre for Theology & Community. It is based on desk research as well as a programme of confidential semi-structured interviews with a range of participants and stakeholders, including lay people and church leaders from different church traditions undertaken in 2015.

THIS REPORT

The rest of this report sets out the findings and possible implications of the information gathered during the research process.

Part A describes the four main challenges for local churches which were identified during interviews with participants in this research.

Part B explores four main ways in which local churches can positively respond to these challenges.

Part C considers how the learning described in Parts A & B applies in the context of walking alongside vulnerable women in east London in particular.

The report finishes with conclusions for both the individuals who are involved in this kind of work or ministry and the local churches they are part of.



PART A: THE CHALLENGE

OUR LISTENING EXERCISE

This research has been compiled primarily from the candid and generous reflections of a range of people who are walking alongside those on the margins of society. We have undertaken in-depth interviews with Christians working:

- In professional secular roles
- As volunteers in both Christian and secular organisations
- In paid roles in Christian charities

These individuals are fulfilling a variety of roles in very different contexts such as:

- A volunteer with Maternity Mates who supports pregnant women facing various challenges e.g. homelessness, drug addiction and previous traumatic births
- A clinical psychologist who offers consultation to social workers and Families First Coaches regarding complex cases, as well as chairing a local charity supporting vulnerable women
- Missionaries with many years of experience working with people who struggle with addictions and homelessness, people in prison and women in the Sylheti community in east London
- A consultant in Genito Urinary Medicine and Clinical Lead for Safeguarding for sexual health clinics in an NHS Trust
- Church leaders from various denominational backgrounds who are involved in different expressions of church
- An employee of Blenheim CDP (Community Drug Project), providing support services for drug and alcohol users, families and carers across London
- Paid members of staff and volunteers in a range of Christian charities working with those on the margins

Whilst these varied roles and contexts present some distinctly different challenges and opportunities, some common themes emerged as participants talked about the relationship between their day-to-day

work lives and callings and their involvement in and connection with local churches.

Each participant was eager to reflect upon the nature of that connection, and to identify ways in which it could become less conflicted and more fruitful. In exploring the tension between the two, some interesting challenges and suggestions emerged.

FOUR MAIN CHALLENGES

The primary challenges for the church, which were identified by participants, revolve around four main issues:

CHALLENGE 1: RECOGNISING THE BREADTH OF LOCAL MISSION

Lay people serving those on the margins do not always feel positively affirmed, supported and released into their calling/ministry by the local churches they are involved in. Those who are engaged in missional work that does not sit under the umbrella of a church's own local outreach programme and is not based 'overseas' often seem to be overlooked in terms of support and recognition.

The question emerging from conversations around these issues is: how can local churches broaden their vision to include and embrace the wider work of the Spirit of God in and through all of their members even if it is beyond the church's own programmes?

CHALLENGE 2: LOOKING IN THE MIRROR

Working alongside 'vulnerable' people who are on the margins often involves having to look in the mirror and see our own issues and vulnerabilities. If this is attended to then 'the gift' can be learning to serve and love others from a healthier place, whilst owning and engaging with our own fragility and need for healing as part of the process. However, in the words of one participant in this research, *"There is a danger if the church is full of 'world changers' who are not admitting to or dealing with their own 'stuff'".*

The question emerging from these conversations is: 'how can local churches grow in depth, vulnerability and authenticity in order to avoid unhealthy work/ministry practices stemming from unrecognized personal

issues and motivations such as co-dependency and 'rescuing' mentalities?'

CHALLENGE 3: INCLUDING THOSE WHO ARE 'DIFFERENT'

Our research suggests that local churches often feel unprepared and ill-equipped to embrace those who are perceived as more 'vulnerable', and that churches and their activities are often experienced as inaccessible by those 'on the margins'. As a result, lay people who are walking alongside vulnerable people locally often feel isolated in their work and somewhat unsupported by the church.


The question emerging from these conversations is: how might churches become more aware of and better able to dismantle the barriers that prevent those who feel 'different' or marginalized from integrating into the church family? How can the whole church community embrace vulnerable people, rather than expecting a few 'expert' individuals to make that journey in isolation?

CHALLENGE 4: SUPPORTING WORKERS TO AVOID BURNOUT

When local churches are unaware of or unresponsive to the support needs of lay people who are serving those on the margins, there is a very real danger of exhaustion and burnout. As one participant reflected: "*An outworking of this type of work for those involved is often burnout. Many do not sustain it for an extended time*".

The question emerging from these conversations is: 'how can local churches work towards ensuring that individuals have the appropriate levels of support, training and pastoral care in place, in order that their work/ministry with those on the margins might become more sustainable and fruitful in the longer term?'

Our discussions during the research highlighted these four primary challenges and also pointed to corresponding ways in which local churches could respond positively to these challenges. The next section explores each of these challenges in more depth and highlights participants' suggestions about how churches can embrace the ministries of lay people serving those on the margins more effectively.



**“AS A LOCAL CHURCH
IN A BUILT UP URBAN
AREA WE ARE ONE
COMPONENT IN A
MUCH BIGGER PICTURE.
I THINK WE IGNORE
THE OTHER ELEMENTS
AT OUR PERIL.”**

PART B: HOW THE CHURCH CAN RESPOND

CHALLENGE 1 – RECOGNISING THE BREADTH OF LOCAL MISSION

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE

The Church seems to struggle to see those serving vulnerable people in the UK as missionaries in the same way as those serving overseas. It would be helpful for the Church to recognize that it's the same missional role and requires the same kind of support and encouragement as similar work overseas. In the UK, churches tend to only recognize this kind of work when a 'project' has been set up, rather than acknowledging and getting behind the whole life ministry of individuals who are serving vulnerable people locally.

Employee, Christian charity

Anglican churches are focused on an immediate parish, and often have links with missional work overseas. There seems to be a gap in terms of sharing things that are happening missionally in the local community.

Employee, Christian charity

Lay people and church leaders consulted for this research identified a gap that exists in recognising and affirming the ministry of those serving vulnerable people in their local communities around London. There is a sense that those working for churches in their immediate parish or locality and those called to missionary work overseas often seem to be offered more support and recognition than those in broader missional work locally:

I felt more supported when I was working for a church previously. It's different now that I'm not working for a church... and when I went to India with YWAM, I had lots of opportunities to share what I would be doing with my church in the UK. While I was away I had a 'champion' who shared what I was doing and my prayer needs. Overseas or 'in parish' roles are more of a focus, so local missional work can be overlooked.

Employee, Christian charity

Participants were interested in exploring the reasons behind why local churches sometimes struggle to see and support the 'whole life ministry' of individuals who are engaging in broader missional work in the local community.

A contributing factor which participants talked about is the interaction between what have been referred to as 'sent' and 'local' forms of church. Sam Metcalf's book 'Beyond the Local Church' explores the dynamics between the two. Metcalf refers to Ralph Winter's article *The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission* in which:

He labeled the church in its local, parish, diocesan form...a modality, and he labeled the church in its task-oriented, missionary, sent form...a sodality. Both church. Both necessary...Wherever these two structures work cooperatively and interdependently, the Christian movement thrives and moves forward.

Metcalf states that 'Sent ones' – the basic meaning of 'apostolic' in the Bible - are those called by God to live and work in non-local church ministry, engaging those whom they long to become followers of Jesus.

This raises the question of whether a healthy hybrid can be fostered, whereby those who might identify as 'sent' rather than 'local' in terms of calling and gifting are able to be dynamically part of, yet equipped and released by, local churches. It is important to avoid any unhelpful polarisation that could result from labeling individuals as either sent/sodalic or local/modalic, and to consider ways in which mutual recognition, cooperation and interdependence can be encouraged in and by local churches.

In Metcalf's words, a helpful goal might be: *to see apostolic people mobilized for effective ministry in local church settings and flooding into ministry beyond the local church both far and near.*

These dynamics are recognisable in the experience of the local church leaders and lay people who participated in this research:

For a long time the church paradigm has been modalic, gathered, local. There has been no appreciation for the sodalic, sent, apostolic church. A high proportion of people at my church are 'sent' and

therefore need church to be a place of good relationships with brothers and sisters, where they can be filled with the Spirit and energised in going out and fulfilling their callings.

Church Leader, Tower Hamlets

One of the outworkings of these dynamics is that church members who might primarily identify with a calling to 'sent' forms of ministry outside of local church walls often feel adrift and isolated within church communities that are geared towards more gathered or modalic expressions of church life.

Another outworking is that those who are 'sent' in this context often experience pressure and a sense of guilt and inadequacy around their lack of capacity to engage in local church activities and priorities:

Sometimes I feel guilty about not doing enough 'at church'. My day-to-day work with women locally means that I don't participate as much in church activities as I don't have the energy.

Volunteer, Christian charity

If there is an expectation to get involved in church activities e.g. on a Saturday, it can feel too much because of the role I am doing throughout the week. It can be a tension – feeling guilty if I'm not helping out with other things, but not having the capacity to do more and needing rest.

Employee, Christian charity

We need to recognize and accept that if people are involved in demanding missional roles locally (including a range of voluntary/professional/family roles), they will have less capacity for involvement in church activities. It's important to ask what each person's call is, and not to judge that. We want to be spiritual family for people, and to ask how we can pray for them and support them in what they are called to do. We don't ask those questions enough and could do better at that.

Church Leader, Tower Hamlets

All of these factors point to a need for local churches to get better at recognizing and celebrating the 'whole life ministry' of individuals who are called to serve vulnerable people locally (as well as those with other equally valid callings), in the same way that those working for churches or 'sent out' by them into overseas ministry are 'seen' and supported.

“IT CAN BE A TENSION – FEELING GUILTY IF I'M NOT HELPING OUT WITH OTHER THINGS, BUT NOT HAVING THE CAPACITY TO DO MORE AND NEEDING REST.”

This requires a broadening of the vision of local churches to include and appreciate the wider work of the Spirit of God in and through all of their members, rather than maintaining a narrower focus

on a handful of church-backed/based activities within the parish, local area or overseas.

What might this look like in practice?

MEETING THE CHALLENGE

Some useful recommendations and practices emerged from conversations with lay people and church leaders, which may help local churches to more clearly 'see' and affirm the ministries of people specifically called to walk alongside those on the margins within our local communities.

1 Acknowledging and affirming

Many of those interviewed expressed how valuable it is to feel known and affirmed in who they are and what their calling is within their church community:

The Priest encourages me in being who I am.

Volunteer in the local community

I try to build relationship with those who are in wider ministry locally, as it's important for them to be known and affirmed in their calling.

Church Leader, Tower Hamlets

Facilitating this knowing and affirming can take various forms such as visiting people in their workplace/ministry setting; offering prayer; one to one meetings; and simply asking how things are going and what an individual's needs are:

It would be good if someone from church threw a rope across now and again by being physically present, coming to visit and being involved in prayer. That relational and spiritual linking feels important.

Volunteer, Christian charity

One Vicar visited the workplaces of each congregation member, and prayed for each person, recognising that we all need to be salt and light wherever we work. I thought this was really positive, as it validated each person in their calling. Another clergy member came alongside us and asked what was happening in our ministry and what our needs were. He listened and did not expect us to be on church rotas, which was great.

Employee, Christian charity

2 Giving opportunities to share

Many church members who are called to walk alongside vulnerable people locally expressed a desire for more opportunities to share about their work/ministry with their wider church community. They felt it would be helpful for churches to make space for shared learning by creating more opportunities to hear about the everyday work/ministries of their lay people:

Some people would love to be asked 'what can the church learn from your work?'

Employee, Christian charity

Sometimes we interview people in church to find out what they will be doing this time tomorrow and praying for them in that. We also have a weekly prayer meeting to pray for those in different sectors, which helps grow an awareness of supporting people in frontline roles of various types.

Church Leader, Tower Hamlets

In these simple ways, the various contexts in which lay people are engaging in mission locally can be more readily acknowledged, supported and included in a broader vision of how God's kingdom is coming locally.

3 Releasing and blessing

A key learning point from this piece of research is the importance of releasing those called to walk alongside vulnerable people locally from duties and obligations within the church that may lead to them

becoming overwhelmed and burnt out. Giving people permission to say no to additional church activities is a way in which church leaders can acknowledge, 'see' and release those called to into these types of missional activity and bless them to be fruitful in their calling.

"I WANT TO SEE CHURCH LEADERS HAVING MORE OF A VISION TO RELEASE PEOPLE TO DO WHAT GOD HAS CALLED THEM TO DO, AND RESOURCING THAT."

This may look like encouraging these individuals to be in relationship with others in

the wider church community, whilst adjusting expectations around their capacity to be involved in certain aspects of 'in-church' activity:

My work is my main missional focus. I would like my church to provide a space for relational support, friendship and community – a place where I can be known and receive personal support and prayer. A group of people that I can be a part of whilst not being pressured or expected to engage in additional activities that I do not have the capacity for.

Employee, Christian charity

I would like there to be more understanding when I withdraw from church activities due to the demands of my work. Sometimes generic demands are made of the congregation, rather than individual needs being considered.

Employee, secular organisation

I want to see church leaders having more of a vision to release people to do what God has called them to do, and resourcing that. Not getting people to serve the vision of the 'church'.

Church Leader, Tower Hamlets

Taking an undefended approach means we can join in with others' success and be part of the wider story of what God is doing locally. If I was being defended I would seek to stop lay people getting involved in external activities. I want to do the opposite – releasing and partnering with others locally.

Church Leader, Tower Hamlets

This learning point accords with Sam Metcalf's observation in 'Beyond the Local Church' that "Paul and his band were 'released,' not sent". He goes on to say:

...what those around Paul and Barnabas did was recognize the Spirit's activity and sovereign choice, and they responded by releasing Paul and Barnabas.

4 Incubating

Another helpful aspect of church support expressed by those who have pioneered specific ministries with those on the margins in London is incubation. When an individual or group of church members are starting a new ministry or activity with vulnerable people, having the support and backing of the local church is very important. A good example of where this worked successfully was in the launch of Arch 76 in Bethnal Green.

Wendy Rolt – a member of Good Shepherd Mission church – started by building relationships in the local community alongside other church members. Over time, it became clear that what was missing was a local group focused primarily on building relationships and creating a sense of community and family with women who are struggling with mental health problems, domestic violence, addictions and isolation.

Good Shepherd Mission acted as an umbrella under which Wendy could start Arch 76 in response to the needs and gap identified,

and in time supported Arch 76 through the process of becoming an independent charity:

Good Shepherd Mission helped me to start the Arch. They helped me to network locally with other charities in order to build relationships. This was key to me entering into the local community. They supported me in what was on my heart.

Wendy Rolt, Arch 76

It is helpful when churches can act as an umbrella under which others can shelter until they have their own structure – enabling new things to grow. We have developed a mindset as a church of being part of something but not 'owning' it. We provided the structure for Arch 76 to start, and that was a privilege. We were a team for Wendy to be part of before there was a team at the Arch... a community for her to operate within.

David Bishop, member of church leadership team, Good Shepherd Mission

There are obvious risks and challenges associated with incubating and partnering in the launch of new ministries such as Arch 76, which need to be considered and worked through. However, this example illustrates how local churches like Good Shepherd Mission have adjusted the lens of their vision in order to see and bless the work of the Holy Spirit in and through their members. It provides a model for how local churches can broaden their vision and celebrate those who are called to 'sent' forms of church in a way that affirms and fully releases them into that calling.

CHALLENGE 2: LOOKING IN THE MIRROR

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE

Working with people 'on the margins', God will change you and speak to you. It's disruptive, but there's a gift in it. Perhaps engagement with our own fragility and brokenness is a big part of it?

In churches where engaging in social action and justice issues is (as it should be) a core focus, it is important to show people how to acknowledge and gain support around their own fragilities as well. Otherwise burnout and disillusionment are almost inevitable. There is a danger if the church is full of 'world changers' who are not admitting to or dealing with their own 'stuff'.

Employee, Christian charity

One of the biggest challenges (and yet opportunities) identified by those who are walking alongside people on the margins is the way in which we encounter our own brokenness and vulnerability along the way. Where individuals are unable to recognise and engage with their own personal issues in this context, unhealthy working and ministry practices result and often lead to burnout and other destructive patterns.

For example, if an individual's work with those on the margins is driven by co-dependency or 'a need to be needed' and is expressed through taking on a 'rescuing' role in the lives of those considered more 'vulnerable', it can lead to hurt and disappointment on all sides. The 'rescuer' can become over-burdened and burnt out as a result of trying to fix everything in another person's life, whilst the person they are attempting to 'help' remains stuck in a role of passivity or victimhood:

Rescuing and thinking you've got to have the answers or be the bearer of change in people's lives is unhealthy. Taking that approach means that those we are walking alongside become recipients, and are therefore passive. The challenge is to let go of your own power and privilege and be in touch with your own issues and brokenness. Otherwise you end up being a sponge rather than

a mirror. As a mirror, you can help people reflect and make their own positive choices.

Employee, Christian charity

If a worker or volunteer is unable to realistically acknowledge their own personal issues and check their motivations for walking alongside those they consider to be more vulnerable, the sustainability and health of their work or ministry is compromised:

'Helping people' who we see as being more broken than us doesn't last unless you can find ways of keeping your own relationship with God alive and relevant. Times of reflection, and checking my motives, helps.

Employee, Christian charity

However, it is clear that where individuals choose to 'look in the mirror' and engage in their own healing process and self reflective work, then the gift can be learning to serve and love others from a healthier place and being used by God in the process of their healing too.

If we are open to receiving this gift individually and corporately, our local churches can grow in depth and authenticity as inclusive communities in which each person feels able to be vulnerable and bring their true self.

What might this journey towards greater authenticity and vulnerability look like for local churches?

MEETING THE CHALLENGE

The church needs to ask itself: how can we be part of breaking a culture in which we think we are not allowed to be fragile? And what is the journey for the church towards greater wellbeing? Having people to help individuals make that transition into greater vulnerability is important, for example through offering spiritual direction and counseling.

Employee, Christian charity

Participants in this research felt that church leaders have a key role to play in modeling leadership and ministry that acknowledges and

includes our own personal vulnerabilities and issues:

Church leaders need to find 'boundaried' ways of sharing their own fragility and being honest about their limitations and capacity. Owning their self care needs and encouraging others to do the same. Developing a church culture where people are given permission to admit and deal with their stress and other issues. Creating a context in which people feel able to bring their reality and fragility.

Employee, Christian charity

Participants suggested that church leaders could positively respond and lead the way through:

- Fostering a culture of openness about our need for personal healing and transformation. In short, naming it!
- Acknowledging their own brokenness and pursuing personal wholeness alongside those they serve.
- Offering help and support in this area to others in the church community e.g. through seeking out and providing opportunities for clergy and lay people to access counseling/therapeutic support, healing prayer, spiritual direction and external supervision where appropriate.
- Gaining a better understanding of their own and others' mental health issues. For example, resources are available through Mind & Soul (mindandsoul.info) and Livability (livability.org.uk) to help train and equip churches and church leaders in relation to these issues.

In these ways, church leaders can support and encourage lay people who are learning these lessons as they walk alongside those on the margins, as well as sharing 'the gift' of that learning with the wider church.

A helpful example of this type of vulnerable leadership was reflected upon by Will Van Der Hart on the Mind & Soul website:

On Sunday February 3rd 2013 at 11.30am something very special happened. One of the most highly regarded Christian leaders in this nation spoke vulnerably and personally about his emotional health in public... Within his talk Nicky (Gumbel) explores different

models of personal growth and... describes himself as struggling specifically in dealing with grief and loss. Nicky's easy candour leads him to describe himself as an 'emotional child' in this area, something that many of us can relate to in one way or another. After a lifetime of following a familial emotional model that favoured silence over discussion, Nicky describes how he began to receive professional therapeutic help, but not via the tempting back door, via the front door, disclosing his journey to friends, family and his church... As I watched the film on the HTB Media catalogue I suddenly felt a huge sense of relief. Not that the whole ice-cap of emotional denial in the broader church has melted, but that a vast cliff had broken off, making a way for other leaders and congregations to acknowledge their own emotional vulnerability and seek restoration in and through Jesus Christ.

Participants in this research also voiced the importance of church leaders challenging any false theology that encourages individuals to think that it is their role to rescue or save others, particularly those considered more 'vulnerable', which can lead to an unhelpful Messiah complex:

My theology has changed from thinking that I was taking Jesus with me on outreach and spreading him around to a sense that I am going out to meet him – that he is already there and I work with him and what he is doing in the lives of the women already. My Messiah complex has melted. That's what burns people out.

Employee, Christian charity

Acknowledging and dealing with our own personal issues, as well as recognising that it is Christ – not us – who rescues and saves, are vital lessons that can be learnt from the experiences of lay people who are working with those on the margins and shared with the wider Church.

CHALLENGE 3 – INCLUDING THOSE WHO ARE DIFFERENT

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE

The welcome team are not trained or equipped to help vulnerable people who come to the church. Recently a homeless man who was drunk came to the church and asked for a Bible. The team who were present said they didn't have one and sent him away... My church finds it hard to deal with people who are more vulnerable. They come and go, and don't tend to integrate longer term in church. One of two people at church get involved in walking alongside them, but not many.

Volunteer, Christian charity

It is clear from the interviews conducted that local churches are not always ready and equipped to include and embrace those on the margins into the church family. Even in cases where churches are keen to welcome those considered more vulnerable, this does not always translate into practice:

The theology for engaging with and supporting vulnerable people is there, but the practice isn't.

Employee, Christian charity

This often leads to lay people who are walking alongside vulnerable people locally feeling unsupported and isolated in their work, and experiencing a disconnect between their church life and work/ministry.

This research points to a number of factors that contribute to

“THE THEOLOGY FOR ENGAGING WITH AND SUPPORTING VULNERABLE PEOPLE IS THERE, BUT THE PRACTICE ISN'T.”

churches struggling to reach out to and include those 'on the margins'.

A key issue is lack of awareness regarding the barriers that make churches feel inaccessible for those on the margins:

I think vulnerable people see the majority of people at church as people with shiny families and nice jobs. Vulnerable people already feel different. There are barriers that stop them relating to people in church. I think church members need to get them more involved in their lives. It's about supporting each other both ways and breaking down barriers.

Volunteer, Christian charity

A local church leader expressed the need for churches to examine themselves and identify blind spots such as language or values that are class or culture based. He reflected on an occasion when a woman was referred to the church by a local mental health unit. After attending a service, she asked 'Do you have to be gregarious to come to this church?' The style and culture of the church were such that it felt inaccessible to her.

On a similar theme, one participant reflected that “People don't realise that they need to be proactive with vulnerable people in order to build relationships – they need to be approached and invited as there is insecurity and they are being brave just by turning up. People might think they don't want to talk to them, but that's not usually the case’.

Volunteer, Christian charity

Another participant talked about various barriers that churches are often unaware of that can prevent vulnerable people from being welcomed and integrated within church communities. For example:

- Physical inaccessibility e.g. having a large numbers of steps into a church building, with no ramps or assistance available for those with physical health issues
- Cultural inaccessibility e.g. the particular language used in a church and its various traditions and ways of worshipping may be unusual to visitors
- Exclusivity in terms of relationship building and communication e.g. in some church communities, relationships are built and communications managed through social media such as WhatsApp groups which some people may not have access to

Participants also observed that church members often seem to feel ill-equipped and unprepared to embrace those on the margins. One individual who walks alongside vulnerable women talked about her experience of bringing some of the women she works with along to a church service, and finding that other members of the church community do not often seek to build relationships with them:

Others are polite to them, but tend not to get involved in loving and caring for them on any in depth level. As a result, many of those who visit don't stay. They are disciplined by myself and others outside of church, or they go to other churches that care for them better.

Employee, Christian charity

MEETING THE CHALLENGE

Participants in this research made a number of recommendations that could help local churches to work towards breaking down barriers, such as those identified above, that prevent vulnerable people from being fully part of church communities.

It is clear that where churches are able to embrace those on the margins into the wider church family it is a huge support to lay people who are working with vulnerable people day to day.

Including and loving people who are particularly vulnerable, and who struggle to engage in and maintain healthy relationships, is far more sustainable when a whole community commits to investing in those relationships, rather than leaving it up to a small number of people who are seen as 'the experts' due to their day to day work or ministries.

Churches can keep 'the poor' at arms length emotionally as they don't know where boundaries should be. The church is called to care, to get involved and to love our neighbours. It's ok for that to be messy and hard, and we don't necessarily burn out as a result. Doing it as community means we can take time out without unplugging vulnerable people from emotional support – it should not be based on one person having those relationships. This is a way of being emotionally involved in a healthy way with very broken people.

Volunteer, Christian charity

Participants in our research felt that community-wide inclusivity could be fostered by local churches in a number of ways:

- *Church leaders can take a lead in creating a church ethos that is inclusive through personally welcoming and building relationships with those on the margins, and being prepared for the discomfort and challenges of that.*
Volunteer, Christian charity
- *Encouraging more church members to look out for and include vulnerable people who are visiting or part of the church would take the pressure off those who support vulnerable people day to day.*
Volunteer, Christian charity
- *Encouraging more appropriate small groups in which people can belong e.g. a daytime group for women who are not working during the day, which is geared around their age, stage and possibly some pre-existing relationships.*
Church Leader, Tower Hamlets
- *Making church services feel more accessible, by making tea and coffee available and having comfortable sofas around so that people don't have to be 'in' the service if they don't feel comfortable... and making church accessible throughout the week, not just on Sundays e.g. through offering inclusive activities such as football, community choirs, cookery groups, night shelters etc.*
Volunteer, Christian charity
- *Modeling and encouraging inclusive hospitality. Some church families open their homes and families and welcome more vulnerable people in. Being invited into a home is a big thing and can be a great blessing both ways.*
Church Leader, Tower Hamlets
- *Making relevant information and resources available to church members to help them assist and respond to those who are more vulnerable e.g. emergency food supplies, clear referral pathways*

into relevant services and local support groups etc.
Volunteer, Christian charity

- Offering training to help more church members to engage appropriately with vulnerable people, taking into account barriers such as language, culture, values etc. Organisations such as Tierra Nueva Europe (tierranueva-europe.org) offer relevant training, including theological reflection and practical application.

In these various ways, churches can prioritise including and embracing those on the margins as well as better supporting lay people who are doing so in their day to day lives and ministries.

On the flipside: ‘elevation to sainthood’

Another issue that can prevent local churches from engaging well with those on the margins is when lay people involved in this work or ministry are put on a pedestal and ‘elevated to sainthood’. This can lead to them feeling isolated and being unable to receive support around their own issues and vulnerabilities, whilst other church members feel unaffirmed and ‘less than’ in their own callings.

The ‘elevation to sainthood’ dynamic can be promoted by some of us in the church of anybody working with those ‘on the margins’. This is hugely problematic, often objectifying both those involved in the work and those they are alongside. We can somehow elevate these roles above and beyond those who are involved in other meaningful work which may also be significantly stressful and may be overlooked.

Employee, Christian charity

People often say what I do is ‘amazing’ but I end up feeling very isolated in that. We each have our callings. I want real relationship, where they don’t see me as a martyr because of my work, but allow me to support them too.

Employee, Christian charity

Participants in this research suggested church leaders and pastors could helpfully avoid and challenge this dynamic through:

- Knowing, affirming and supporting each member of the church in their callings and workplaces.
- Teaching and demonstrating that loving those on the margins is a core part of us all responding to the Great Commission and learning to love our neighbours together as a church community:

Working with those on the margins needs to be de-mystified. It’s not a massive thing. You learn to do it minute by minute. Prayer walking is a good start, then God shows you what to do. Church leaders can teach and demonstrate that it’s about getting to know your community. It’s not that hard. It’s not for someone else to do. We can all get to know our neighbours where we live. The Great Commission is for everyone!

Employee, Christian charity

It’s about being aware of the power of even just going for a coffee with people we meet who are at their wit’s end e.g. a mum from school. These things are important in themselves. Making time for people who are struggling in various ways. Being sacrificial with your time. Recognising that simple acts like that are as important as ‘working with the homeless’.

Volunteer, Christian charity

CHALLENGE 4 – SUPPORTING WORKERS TO AVOID BURN-OUT

UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE

The final main challenge that emerged through this research is the importance of local church leaders and pastors recognising that lay people who are walking alongside those on the margins do not always have the necessary support, training and resources in place in order for their work to be healthy and sustainable:

Workload/pressures can prevent individuals receiving the support and supervision they need. People shouldn't be allowed to work in these fields unless they are engaging with the level of supervision that is needed. There are consequences when you don't get the necessary support – alcohol use, recklessness.

Employee, secular organisation

When local churches are unaware of or unresponsive to the support needs of lay people who are serving in these and other challenging roles, there is a very real danger of exhaustion and burnout. As one participant reflected:

Often people in this kind of work do not have the resources, capacity or support required to cope with the needs they are facing. Therefore, an outworking of this type of work for those involved is often burnout. Many do not sustain it for an extended time.

Employee, Christian charity

Other participants talked about times when their church communities had failed to 'hold' and care for them through particularly difficult experiences:

In times of crisis, such as when I was assaulted and had to leave the area under police protection, there was no pastoral support offered by my church. The focus is on getting lay people involved in church projects and initiatives rather than finding ways of

supporting people in their workplaces and ministries outside of church. This leads to lay people like me becoming disconnected with church. If more pastoral support was offered, it would help avoid this disconnection.

Employee, Christian charity

Even in cases where appropriate support is in place, it is important to recognise that walking alongside extremely vulnerable people and dealing with the complex needs and issues they are facing is very challenging and can have a huge impact on those in this type of work or ministry:

This call can be extremely difficult. You face abuse and rejection. Tragic stories take their toll on you. Some years ago I took on too much emotional baggage from the people I was working with. This led to a breakdown. Counseling helped...

Employee, Christian charity

Jesus didn't say defending the cause of the weak and fatherless and maintaining the rights of the poor and oppressed would be easy or painless. It is a costly, beautiful, challenging and central part of following Him. As members of Christ's body – the Church – we should not aim to insulate ourselves or each other from the difficulties and pain of a journey that is so close to God's own heart. But we can walk with, counsel, comfort and pray for one another in it. We can come alongside and lighten one another's load.

Participants in this research were keen to explore what that might look like, resulting in the recommendations below.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE

1 Pastoral care and prayer

Participants acknowledged that they did not expect their church community to provide all the support they needed, and reflected on the importance of self-care alongside professional supervision, where appropriate.

However, many participants talked about how helpful it is when they are offered pastoral and prayer support within their church community.

Recommendations included:

- Prayer support for each person involved in this kind of work by others in the church community. Also committing to pray for the work/ministry as a whole e.g. in church services and through participation in prayer events for the work or ministry.
- Making sure each individual has pastoral support in place through offering someone to talk to about issues that are impacting them in their work. This may include providing emotional support and, where appropriate, referrals to qualified counsellors or therapists.

Participants emphasised the importance of finding out what people want and need in terms of support, as this will be different depending on the individual and situation. For example, it may be that some have supervision in place through their paid or voluntary role and primarily need support in terms of prayer, whereas others may not have appropriate supervision in place and may need a space in which they can process issues e.g. through counselling.

One participant reflected, *“It might look like asking them, ‘What are the things that you are putting in place to make this sustainable?’ Making sure that people are being asked this question pastorally and regularly, and inviting them to acknowledge their limitations and strengths, is vital”.*

Employee, Christian charity

2 Training, supervision, resources and finance

Church leaders and pastors can help lay people in these roles to consider their training and supervision needs, and work with them to make sure that these are being covered. These needs may already be met under the auspices of the organisation/context they are working or ministering in. In situations where there are unmet needs, churches may consider supporting the individual to access appropriate training and supervision independently e.g. through referrals to affordable counsellors and supervisors.

Good Shepherd Mission's support of Wendy Rolt through the process of setting up Arch 76 in Bethnal Green again provides a good

example of how local churches can play a vital role in this regard:

We chatted with Wendy and found that the situations of women at the Arch could feel overwhelming for her. It was putting her under strain. We lacked the resources as a church to hold that, so we introduced her to a local counseling service, where she was able to access external supervision. With hindsight, it would have been good to have that in place from day one of setting up something like the Arch from scratch. Back then our staff didn't have external supervision either. Now they all do and we feel that it is vital. It enables them to do a good job and to look after themselves.

David Bishop, member of church leadership team, Good Shepherd Mission

David went on to reflect on the role of local churches in relation to this more broadly:

When we are flagging up opportunities for people to get involved in these areas, we need to make sure they are working within clear boundaries and have access to supervision if needed. There should be a focus on the wellbeing of the worker or volunteer as well as those they are serving.

In cases where specialised training may be appropriate, some participants in this research felt that it would be helpful to have an opportunity to talk and pray with someone at church in order to identify the best way of being trained and equipped for their role. In addition, participants recommended various specialised training options including:

- Pioneer Leader training through Church Mission Society: *I found this to be great training and very equipping for what I feel called into by God. It is also a very supportive community/network.*
Volunteer in the local community
- Cross cultural training through All Nations Bible College.
- Tierra Nueva Europe's Certificate in Transformational Ministry at the Margins, which is designed for those serving and pioneering

work in (or on behalf of) poor and marginalised communities: *It has been affirming to be with those in similar work. The content of the training is great and is applied through ministry during the training sessions.*

Employee, Christian charity

In terms of access to relevant resources, one participant felt that the Church urgently needs to develop more resources for working and ministering with those on the margins:

NOOMA, the Seven Signs of John and the Discovery Bible Study approaches are more appropriate than other resources out there. Alan Hirsch states that the Church is working for 15 per cent of the population, whilst there is a lack of resources for connecting with the other 85 per cent. Creating more relevant resources for those working on the margins should be a priority.

Employee, Christian charity¹

In terms of financial support, participants spoke about how encouraging it is when local churches choose to get behind their work or ministry financially. One participant reflected on how generous her church had been when she was starting up her work with vulnerable women. They set up a fund for the charity which people could donate to via the church and also made regular gifts to help support her personally as her role was voluntary:

It felt like they had my back, and were also helping to support the work as it started out and grew.

Employee, Christian charity

Other participants talked about how it is hugely encouraging when churches recognize their missional role through offering some financial support either to the individual if their role is voluntary or to the work

¹ For more information on the resources mentioned, please see the following links:

NOOMA: nooma.com

The Seven Signs of John: cmaresources.org/article/seven-signs-in-john

Discovery Bible Study: worldmissionsevangalism.com/discovery-bible-studies

or ministry itself as an expression of partnership. In the words of a local church leader:

When a member of the church community has a vision, we look at resourcing and getting behind that financially.

Church Leader, Tower Hamlets

Another option is for local churches to consider including individuals in the church staff team or recognising them as 'associates', either on a paid or voluntary basis, as a means of partnering with them in their work with vulnerable people locally.

3 Awareness of individual needs/preferences

Lay people consulted during this research said they find it helpful when church leaders and pastors are aware of and sensitive to how much they want their church, work and ministry life to overlap, and if/when they prefer to allow for some separation between these aspects of their life and calling. For some individuals, there is a desire to integrate and bring together their church, work and ministry:

If my work with local women was more integrated with my church life, that would help and would increase awareness within the church about my role. For example, it might be helpful to explore being part of the church team in some capacity, even if just for a few hours a week. I would like to feel more 'part of the church community.'

Employee, Christian charity

For others, allowing for some separation and space between the different aspects of their life is vital:

I would find it off-putting if people asked me about my work at church. I prefer to keep the two things separate. Being involved in my church family is like going home – it is the context in which I can be fed, nurtured, receive teaching, worship and build relationships. Perhaps this separation is helpful for me because of my personality.

Employee, Christian charity

In some ways, due to the demands of my work, it is helpful to have some separation with the church, so as not to be drained emotionally there.

Employee, Christian charity

People at church often ask me about my work, but I would like to be seen as a person, not just as the leader of a ministry. When I'm at church I want to have a break from the day to day of my work.

Volunteer, Christian charity

A key principle across the board is good communication between church leaders, pastors and lay people. Where communication is clear and open, local churches can increase their awareness of and responsiveness to the various support needs of individual lay people who are serving those on the margins locally.

4 Acknowledging limitations and working in partnership with others

In all of this, it is important for local churches to be able to acknowledge their limitations in terms of capacity and focus. It is not realistic to expect every local church to effectively respond to all the challenges outlined throughout this report in all the ways suggested.

Many of those interviewed for our research talked about the importance of 'seeing the bigger picture' of how God is working in and through different churches, ministries, workplaces and expressions of faith in their local area. Building relationships and communicating with relevant partners and services locally is vital. One participant commented:

One church leader arranged monthly meetings involving the Mayor, housing services, probation and voluntary services in order to share information and avoid duplication. That was really positive.

Employee, Christian charity

Local churches and lay people who are walking with those on the margins can benefit their local communities hugely by looking for ways in which they can link up and share resources and ideas with others who

are working towards the same goals. This reduces duplication, builds capacity, increases sustainability and encourages interdependence in a way that strengthens and unifies the body of Christ.

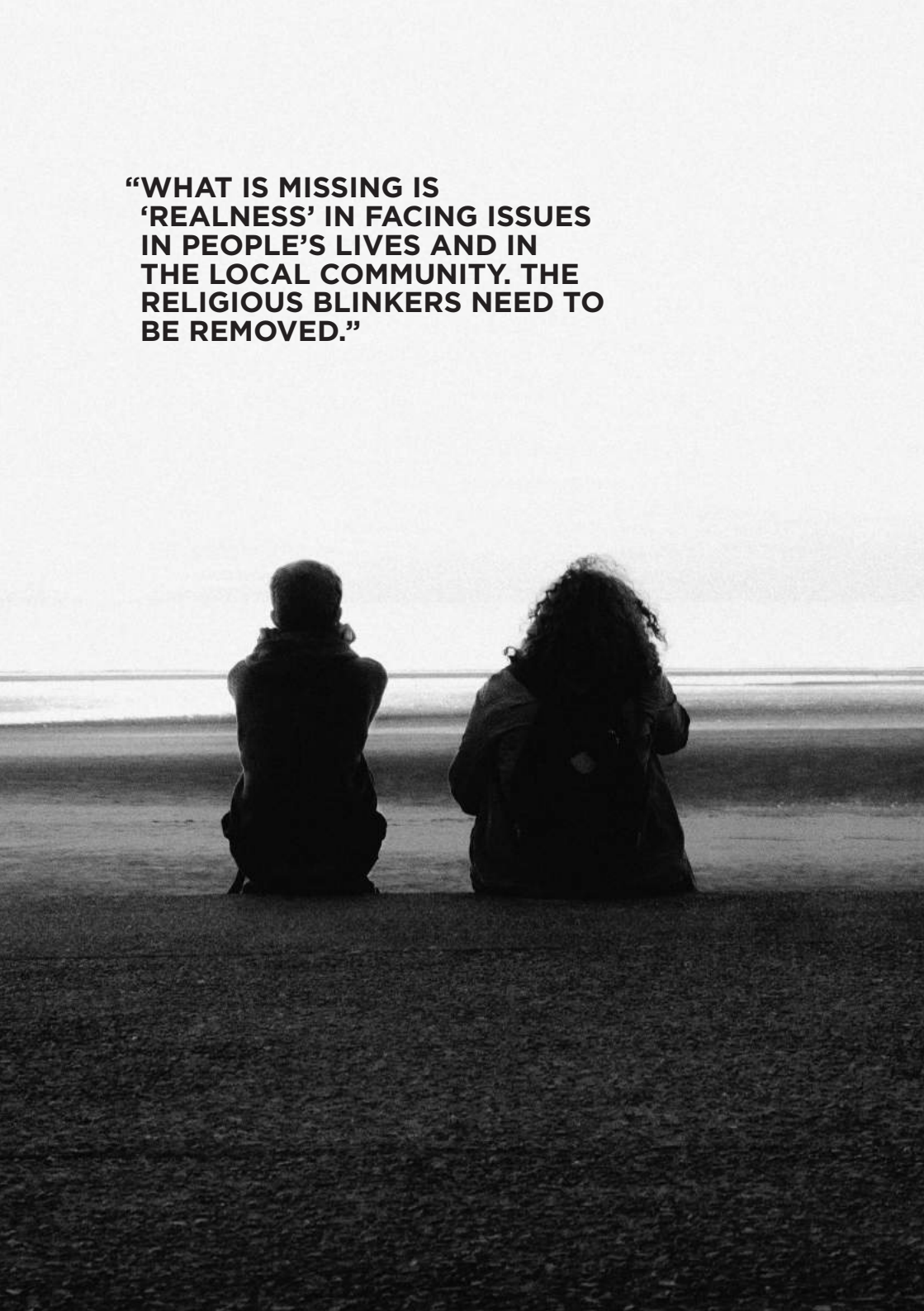
In the words of one local church leader:

I am excited about exploring where our church fits alongside all the other things going on locally. As a local church in a built up urban area we are one component in a much bigger picture. I think we ignore the other elements at our peril. I am making connections and building relationships in order to encourage complementarity, and in acknowledgement of the fact that we don't have all the resources or time. I want to support and encourage others who have the same goals.

Church Leader, Tower Hamlets

**“WHAT IS MISSING IS
'REALNESS' IN FACING ISSUES
IN PEOPLE'S LIVES AND IN
THE LOCAL COMMUNITY. THE
RELIGIOUS BLINKERS NEED TO
BE REMOVED.”**

PART C: CASE STUDY: SERVING VULNERABLE WOMEN IN EAST LONDON



INTRODUCTION

Several of the individuals interviewed during this research are walking alongside vulnerable women in east London, in a variety of ways. Their reflections and experiences speak into and amplify some of the challenges and suggested responses identified in Parts A and B of this report. This section of the report explores how.

HOW CHURCHES ARE ENGAGING WITH LOCAL MISSIONAL WORKERS

Two challenges identified in Part A were:

- Recognising the breadth of local mission
- Supporting these workers to avoid burn-out

Those who are engaged in missional work that does not sit under the umbrella of a church's own local outreach programme and is not based 'overseas' often seem to be overlooked in terms of support and recognition.

My church has not been supportive of my voluntary role supporting vulnerable women. It is a big church, which only supports people who take part in missional activities that sit under its own umbrella. Because I have not stayed within their umbrella of projects, I currently receive no support in terms of prayer, finance or emotional support.

Volunteer, Christian charity

The question emerging from this is how can local churches broaden their vision to include and embrace the wider work of the Spirit of God in and through all of their members locally?

Various participants in this research who are walking alongside vulnerable women in east London talked about how some local churches have responded positively in the ways suggested in Part B such as:

- Acknowledging and affirming them in who they are and what their

calling is.

- Giving them opportunities to share about their work with the wider church community.
- Releasing them from obligations within the church that may lead to them becoming overwhelmed and blessing them to embrace their own calling.
- Incubating or offering start-up support to work/ministries initiated by church members.

One interviewee volunteers for a charity that supports vulnerable women. She has a vision to start a housing project for women in the future. She talked about how her church is a supportive community to be part of where she feels known:

The pastor and his wife are very supportive of me in my call to work with women and are already discussing how the church can support me as this develops in future. The pastor's wife has initiated meeting with me monthly.

She values the opportunities she is often given at church to talk about issues relating to vulnerable women:

I have been asked to share some anti-trafficking training I attended with a group in my church.

She also appreciates being able to let church leaders know if she needs to take time off from some church roles and activities when the demands of her work and ministry leave her feeling exhausted or overwhelmed.

In the same vein, a local church leader reflected on the importance of monitoring how much lay people who are walking alongside vulnerable people are taking on in terms of additional church activities and responsibilities:

I don't put demands on people to do additional things. For example, I might invite someone to teach, but they can opt out of that if they are too busy.

Church Leader, Tower Hamlets

Another participant in our research talked about how a local church had offered her support in ‘incubating’ and setting up a safe home for women who have experienced sexual exploitation:

The church is helping to make it happen through employing me and a part-time worker.

Employee, Christian charity

These positive examples of local churches recognising, releasing and supporting church members who feel specifically called to walk alongside vulnerable women in east London accord with the successful collaboration between Good Shepherd Mission and Wendy Rolt in the setting up of Arch 76, as described in Part B of this report.

CHURCHES LEARNING HOW TO EMBRACE OTHERS

The two further challenges identified in Part A for local churches to consider were:

- Looking in the mirror
- Including those who are different

The importance and urgency around these questions was evidenced in the reflections of one interviewee who recounted her experiences of starting a charity offering support to women involved in prostitution in east London:

When we started working with women involved in prostitution, it felt like churches didn't want to know or get involved. I think they saw prostitution as a choice. Over time we raised awareness of the exploitation experienced by women and tried to get churches on board. I took one of the women along to a local church, and she left straight away because there was a man in the congregation who was her client. So we became church for these women – I think some of them would have felt they stood out too much in

local churches.

Employee, Christian charity

This was one of the more sobering and challenging reflections shared in the process of this research, clearly bringing to the fore the issues that emerge when local churches and their members do not ‘look in the mirror’ and engage with their own brokenness, fragilities and need for healing. Instead, those needs and issues are displaced on to the ‘other’ who is perceived as damaged or tainted through their more obvious ‘choices’.

This highlights a dangerous gap in terms of depth and authenticity within local churches, which in turn reinforces and solidifies the barriers that prevent those who feel ‘different’ from integrating into the church family.

Participants who are working with vulnerable women in various contexts in east London also talked about the stigma that exists in local churches around issues such as sexual health and prostitution. There is a perceptible awkwardness around discussing these issues in church contexts, which can lead to those involved in these types of work or ministry feeling unsupported in their roles:

Some areas of work/ministry such as prostitution make people feel uncomfortable, resulting in a lack of engagement and support within churches for those who are working with these women. What is missing is ‘realness’ in facing issues in people’s lives and in the local community. The religious blinkers need to be removed.

Volunteer, Christian charity

In the past, going along to home groups, I didn't feel that people ‘got’ what I was doing. I couldn't share what I was dealing with because it felt too much for the group (e.g. going to the police with women who were experiencing abuse). I did not feel held and validated in what I was going through. On Sundays I would feel isolated.

Employee, Christian charity

Participants in this research touched on some examples of how local churches have responded positively to these challenges in some of the ways suggested in Part B, such as:

- Church leaders fostering a culture of openness about our need for personal healing and transformation and offering help/support in this area to others in the church community.
- Improving accessibility and encouraging community-wide inclusivity within local churches, where those ‘on the margins’ are embraced into the wider church family rather leaving it up to one or two ‘experts’ within the church.
- Offering lay people pastoral support, prayer, training, supervision, resources and finance where appropriate.

Again, these types of positive response are illustrated by the way in which Good Shepherd Mission supported Wendy Rolt through the setting up of Arch 76, as described in Part B of this report. The church was able to discern Wendy’s increasing support needs, recognise the limitations of its own internal resources to meet those needs, and find additional support for Wendy in the form of external supervision at a local counseling service.

Another local church leader talked about the support that has been put in place for those in the church who are working with vulnerable women locally. This involves offering regular pastoral support and providing supervision where individual workers and volunteers can reflect on their own issues, fragilities and responses as they serve others.

In addition, clear communication is encouraged within the church team regarding issues that arise in relation to integrating and caring for vulnerable women who are part of the church:

As a church, we have to think through how we integrate more vulnerable people within the community. I have a desire to protect and to help people check where their validation is coming from. We talk about challenges and issues as a team, so that those who are working more directly with the women can speak into and monitor things. We are investing in safe women to work with those who are more vulnerable and I am looking at employing someone to take pastoral responsibility for them.

Church Leader, Tower Hamlets

This church community is intentional about embracing vulnerable women as a community and not leaving it all up to those who are walking alongside them day to day:

Some vulnerable women are coming along to church. The church’s response is to make sure that additional people are focused on them and being alongside them in this context, so that those who are walking alongside these women day to day do not feel alone in supporting them in the church setting.

Employee, Christian charity

In addition, the church is keen to find accessible ways of including and engaging with those who are ‘on the margins’:

When we meet we have worship, teaching and discussion, but there are no long monologues, and we always look at life application.

Church Leader, Tower Hamlets

Another participant talked about how her church supports her by embracing the vulnerable women she works with in a wider church context and by being inclusive and accessible for those women:

The church is good at trying to be inclusive. For example, through opening the church weekend away up to the women I am walking alongside – this is a huge support and has worked well.

Volunteer, Christian charity

The specific experiences and reflections of interviewees who are walking alongside vulnerable women in east London highlight some key concerns and gaps that exist or can grow within local churches. For example:

- where safe space for recognising and dealing with our own brokenness is not fostered and prioritised; and
- where unrecognised barriers prevent those perceived as ‘other’ or ‘more broken’ from being part of the body

If we cannot name, own and engage in issues surrounded and ring-fenced by stigma and shame – particularly those relating to mental health and sexuality (such as pornography and prostitution) – then as individuals and church families we will be the poorer in terms of accessing deeper levels of personal and social wholeness and healing.

It is clear that where leaders and members of local churches are able to own and gain support around their own personal issues, overcome stigma and work towards dismantling barriers and embracing those on the margins, it is a huge support to lay people who are working with vulnerable people day to day. Furthermore, it is a step in the direction of increased wholeness within the body of Christ, where those seen as weaker or more vulnerable are included and treated 'with special honour' in the same way that they were embraced with particular tenderness by Jesus:

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.

1 Corinthians 12: 21-26



CONCLUSIONS

LEARNING FOR INDIVIDUALS WALKING ALONGSIDE THOSE ON THE MARGINS

One of the key learning points from this research is how walking alongside vulnerable people who are facing complex challenges holds an implicit invitation for workers and volunteers in these roles to look at and acknowledge their own brokenness and support needs. It is vital to take responsibility for finding safe spaces in which to engage with personal issues and fragilities as they emerge. In the words of one participant:

I have learned to pay more attention to self-care and self-awareness, and to ask what I am doing about my needs rather than always expecting the church to meet those needs or be the answer.

Employee, Christian charity

Alongside this, it is important to consider how the local church can support and equip those with a particular calling over the long term. The same participant went on to suggest:

If your church can't support you in the ways you need, but you belong and feel committed there, then the onus is on you to access the support you need by 'owning your stuff' and finding sustaining peer relationships elsewhere. However, if your church is well resourced but not supportive then you should raise the question with church leaders/pastors. This may create an opportunity for the whole church to engage with recognising our own issues, challenges and support needs and working out where those are met and held.

Employee, Christian charity

The challenges and responses outlined in this report should provide some useful questions to discuss with leaders and others in your church, as you continue to prioritise loving and including those who are particularly vulnerable at the heart of church life and in your day-to-day life and calling.

LEARNING FOR THE WIDER CHURCH

There are a number of challenges and suggestions offered in this report, which have been gleaned from the experiences of local church leaders and lay people who are walking alongside those on the margins.

There is an important challenge for churches (both members and leaders) to increase their awareness of the barriers that stop those who are considered more 'broken' from integrating and becoming part of church communities. A key part of this is choosing to own and engage with our own fragilities and needs, rather than displacing them on to the 'other' who we (intentionally or not) keep at a distance on the margins. In the words of one participant:

Perceiving the gap between the story you're telling and the one you're living.

Employee, Christian charity

Perhaps the greatest encouragement is for local churches to broaden their vision in order to 'see' and be a part of the breadth and depth of how God's kingdom is coming in our communities, and in particular in the lives of those who are most vulnerable.

Lay people whose work or ministry with those on the margins takes place primarily outside of church walls, may perhaps be perceived as keyholes through which others can see ways of engaging with this wider work of the Holy Spirit.

If church leaders and pastors can 'see' and take steps to equip, encourage and release these lay people into their callings, then the body of Christ may grow and be strengthened.

If local churches can apply some of the learning shared by participants in this research, then the whole body may increase in fullness, depth and authenticity as together we learn what it really means to love our neighbours as ourselves. There is, indeed, 'a gift in it'.

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