

# CHURCHES COLLABORATING FOR URBAN MISSION

*Learning from  
The Shoreditch Group*

*By Tim Thorlby*

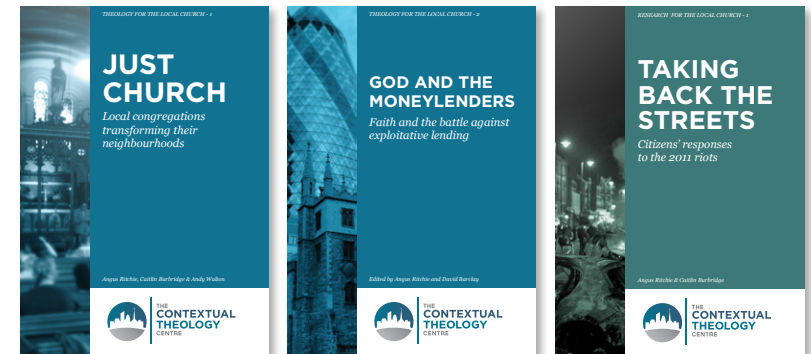


THE  
**CONTEXTUAL  
THEOLOGY**  
CENTRE



Based in the East End of London, our mission is to equip churches to engage with their communities. We support congregations of different denominations – helping them to care for their neighbours, to work for social justice and to share their faith. We do this by developing their theological understanding and their capacity to act. We also seek to share good practice, and to give voice to the experience of inner-city churches in wider public debate. The Centre grows out of the involvement of local churches in broad-based community organising. This practice continues to be an important influence on our work.

For more information, please visit **[www.theology-centre.org](http://www.theology-centre.org)**



The Centre publishes its own reports in two different series:

## THEOLOGY FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH

This series helps local churches reflect on their mission, and links reflection to practical action.

### **1 Just Church:**

*Local congregations transforming their neighbourhoods*

### **2 God and the Moneylenders:**

*Faith and the battle against exploitative lending*

## RESEARCH FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH

This series presents research findings about the contexts within which the church operates and about how the church is responding to those. Our aim is to inform churches' reflection on their mission – what it is and how it should be done.

### **1 Taking Back the Streets:**

*Citizens' responses to the 2011 riots*

# CONTENTS

## FOREWORD

## SUMMARY

<b>1. INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2. THE SHOREDITCH GROUP: the story.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3. THE SHOREDITCH GROUP: assessing the impact.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>4. TRANSFERABLE LEARNING: lessons for others.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>5. DIAKONIA AND URBAN MISSION.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>6. CONCLUSIONS.....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>37</b>

# FOREWORD

I am delighted to commend this report to you. It tells the story of how a group of churches, and others, have successfully worked together for a common purpose - to promote the regeneration of their part of East London.

It is our kind of project. The Bishop of London's Mission Fund supports church-based projects that make a real difference to deprived communities across London. We were approached by the Shoreditch Group in 2011 and agreed to support them for three years. We were excited about encouraging church leaders to create new partnerships within their community.

It is great to see this grassroots project having such a positive impact in local churches - of various denominations - and seeing their contribution to social regeneration amidst some of the most deprived communities in London.

This report confirms our conviction that when churches work together they are able to multiply their impact on our city. Here's to more partnerships and more collaboration.

*Andy Brookes*

*Chief Executive of the London Diocesan Fund  
Deputy Chair, The Bishop of London's Mission Fund*

# SUMMARY

## THE SHOREDITCH GROUP

The Shoreditch Group began work in the Autumn of 2010 and has operated since then across a 'greater Shoreditch' area in East London.

The Shoreditch Group has explored a new way of bringing churches together, and unlocking their capacity to undertake more social action. Churches are often key 'anchors' in their local communities. The Group has promoted a form of 'asset-based community development', with churches mobilising their own resources and also working with other community groups, local businesses and government, in achieving that change.

The Shoreditch Group has been led by a local Vicar, with a part-time Co-ordinator employed by the Contextual Theology Centre. It has focused on building relationships to develop new social action projects. This has taken place mainly through one to one meetings as well as running regular Breakfasts in local cafes, as a forum to bring together both church leaders and local charities.

## BENEFITS AND IMPACTS

The Shoreditch Group has delivered a range of benefits to churches and their communities in the area:

- **A MATCH-MAKING NETWORK** - the Breakfasts have helped people to really connect and build strong working relationships. Over 100 different people have participated so far, representing 38 different local churches and 25 different charities.
- **A MOBILISING NETWORK** - The Group has directly helped over 30 churches to mobilise their own people and resources to initiate, partner with and contribute to projects meeting social need.
- **STRONGER COMMUNITY ORGANISING** – more churches have got to know about the work of London Citizens (the community organising network) and have since become active members.

- **NEW SOCIAL ACTION PROJECTS** - The Shoreditch Group has played an active role in establishing several new social action projects which have directly addressed local poverty, personal debt, mental health and community safety, for example:
  - Through **Hackney Foodbank** over 30 churches are working together to feed more than 1,000 households per year.
  - At the **Mission Practice**, after seven months, the Community Networker has had 86 patients referred to her. The project has been mainly helping people struggling with mental health issues or loneliness.
  - Through **CitySafe**, 16 new City Safe Havens have been designated.

## LEARNING THE LESSONS

The kind of Group we describe here is open, dynamic, relational and collaborative. It is not a committee or a club with regular members. There is very little, if any, paperwork for participants, and few formalities. It is ecumenical, in working with a range of church denominations and traditions. Above all, it has a specific **outward-looking purpose and goal**. It is focused on a geographical area small enough within which to build relationships.

We suggest that the Church and its mission would benefit from more collaborative initiatives of this nature. Working together, we are greater than the sum of our parts. The Group's main ingredients are:

- **A NETWORK** – the starting point is at least a handful of like-minded churches (across denominations) and other Christian organisations, willing to work together, plus other agencies who are willing to collaborate as 'people of peace'.
- **A MATCH-MAKER** – the network needs at least one gifted networker/facilitator who is happy to serve the network by taking action to make introductions between people. This does not need to be a formal role, but someone should be doing it.
- **A PART-TIME CO-ORDINATOR** – someone needs to be available for at least a few hours each week to organise the meetings,

establish new links, develop projects and fundraise. The Shoreditch Group Co-ordinator's hours have varied from 10 hours per week to 3 days per week.

- **EXTRA CAPACITY** - additional 'doing' capacity in the form of interns or volunteers within churches can make a significant difference, especially in churches with limited resources. This can be difficult to organise, and is not always essential, but is an important ingredient worth considering.

## CONCLUSIONS

We are confident that The Shoreditch Group and its many partners have contributed to the social regeneration of the area.

After nearly four years, The Shoreditch Group has been taking stock of its work and hopes to build on the work to date. Much work remains to be done in mobilising resources to meet the many needs in the area. We remain confident that a proactive network can still add value in linking new people in, and sparking new ideas and collaborations.

It is suggested here that more urban neighbourhoods may benefit from network initiatives like The Shoreditch Group. We encourage the Church, across all its denominations, to consider how it can best support and make resources available for effective collaboration in developing social ministries that promote the common good.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 AIMS

Since Autumn 2010, a network of church leaders and charities in Shoreditch, East London, have been meeting and collaborating on mission. This became known as ‘The Shoreditch Group’ and has led to many new relationships and new projects addressing social need in the area.

This research reviews the Group’s work and identifies what lessons might be learned about how churches in deprived areas could collaborate more effectively.

The purpose of this report is therefore to:

- Review the origins, development, operation and impact of the Shoreditch Group
- Reflect upon the work and what it means
- Identify any lessons for effective church mission focused on ‘justice and mercy’

## 1.2 OUR APPROACH

This report has been prepared by the Contextual Theology Centre. It is based on a thorough desk review of documents and data as well as a programme of confidential semi-structured interviews with a range of participants and stakeholders undertaken in the first quarter of 2014.

This is not an independent review, as the Contextual Theology Centre has been involved in supporting the Shoreditch Group. Nonetheless we have sought to undertake a rigorous review by seeking out and reflecting on a range of perspectives on the work of The Shoreditch Group.

## 1.3 THIS REPORT

The rest of this report sets out the story and possible implications of The Shoreditch Group’s work so far. Section 2 describes the origins and activities of the Group. Section 3 sets out the evidence for what has been achieved so far, together with some comment on the issues that have arisen. Section 4 attempts to distil what has been learned for anyone interested in doing something similar. Section 5 provides a brief theological reflection on the Group’s work and what it might mean for the Church. The report finishes with conclusions in Section 6, for both the Shoreditch Group and the wider Church.





---

## 2 THE SHOREDITCH GROUP: THE STORY

---

This section describes the origins and operation of The Shoreditch Group and tells the story of its work so far. There is not the space to report on every detail or activity, but this section seeks to give the main story.

## 2.1 ORIGINS

The Shoreditch Group began work in the autumn of 2010. As with most projects, it was born out of a very particular set of circumstances.

A new charity - the Mayor's Fund for London – had been founded in 2009, mainly funded by London-based businesses, to tackle poverty and disadvantage amongst young people. It began its work with a set of pilot interventions in a geographical area in inner East London focused on an 'impact area' roughly co-terminus with the historic pre-1974 London Borough of Shoreditch. One of the first projects that the Mayor's Fund supported was Shoreditch Citizens, a joint initiative with London Citizens, to establish a stronger community organising network within the area. (The Mayor's Fund now works across London.)

The creation of a focused geographical area, allied with the prospect of funding for regeneration projects, inspired a complementary initiative – The Shoreditch Group. Lord Wei of Shoreditch - Nat Wei,

“  
**DOING  
CHURCH IN  
THE INNER  
CITY IS A  
TOUGH  
BUSINESS**

the Government's Big Society Tsar at the time and also a local resident – wanted to find a new way to more actively involve churches as well as other socially-minded local residents, institutions and businesses in the social and economic regeneration of Shoreditch, and to do so in a sustainable way. The aim was that these different sectors – business, church, community, government - would work together.

Although there are many churches in the inner city, they are often small and under-resourced. Doing church in the inner city is a tough business. So,

the original aim of The Shoreditch Group was to explore a new way of bringing churches together, and unlocking their capacity to undertake more transformational social action. Churches are often key 'anchors' in their local communities. If a way could be found to support them and mobilise their resources, together and separately, then maybe the Group could help to unlock greater benefits for the local community. It would

be a form of ‘asset-based community development’ in which churches could also work with other community groups, local businesses and government, in achieving that change.

Nat shared this vision with a friend who was a local Vicar – Revd Adam Atkinson, who had just arrived at St Peter’s, Bethnal Green, a Church of England parish – and who was interested in helping to lead the Shoreditch Group. They pulled together £15,000 of local charitable and philanthropic funding and found a part-time Co-ordinator, Helen Moules, to run the Group. As St Peter’s was just re-starting through a church planting partnership at the time, it was also agreed that a local ecumenical charity, the Contextual Theology Centre (the author of this report), would assist the project by holding the funding and employing Helen on the Group’s behalf.

## 2.2 A WORD ABOUT SHOREDITCH

Shoreditch has acquired a certain fame. Traditionally, this part of inner East London and the neighbourhoods around it, have been deprived and gritty - a place for industry and work as well as home to waves of immigrants over the years.

In more recent years, the area has also developed a vibrant nightlife and new resident artists have given parts of the area a certain creative cachet. They have been followed by property investors, businesses and tourists as it has grown in popularity.

Today, the whole area is a real mix of wealth and deprivation, of tradition and fashion. From Brick Lane and its curry houses to the fashionable bars and restaurants of Shoreditch itself, to the art galleries of neighbouring Hoxton, to ‘Silicon Roundabout’ at Old St, this part of inner East London has been ‘gentrifying’ rapidly in the last 20 years, and prices have been rising. Yet much poverty remains, and many in the local communities are not sharing in the area’s rising fortunes.

The Shoreditch Group does not have a formally defined geographical area, but has operated across an area that is centred on Shoreditch, in the London Borough of Hackney, but which goes wider and covers a couple of square miles. The area broadly stretches from Old Street in Islington (to the west) to Bethnal Green in Tower Hamlets (to the

East), and from the City of London’s fringes (to the south) to Dalston in Hackney (to the North).

However, relationships and networks have been more important than boundaries and maps.

## 2.3 EARLY DAYS: 2010-2011

There are three parts to what the Shoreditch Group did in its first year – Breakfasts, projects and Mission Year.

### 2.3.1 *Breakfast is served*

The Shoreditch Group began work...with Breakfast. Several Breakfasts in fact.

Every few months, starting in the Autumn of 2010, a short business-like Breakfast meeting was organised in a different local café, rotating around the area. The ‘third space’ non-church context of a café was essential to creating the right ‘feel’, being neutral, professional and local. People were personally invited to the Breakfast by the co-ordinator.

The Breakfast meetings began at 8.30am and lasted an hour. To begin with these involved about 15 people, mainly local church leaders from different denominations across the area who had been invited. Over time, representatives from some charities (mainly Christian) working in the area also became involved, adding to the mix.

The Breakfast meetings followed a regular pattern. They began and ended with informal time for networking and conversations over coffee, with a more structured meeting of 45 minutes in between. The structured meeting began with a ‘rounds question’ as everyone introduced themselves and spoke for no more than a minute in response to a question which brought out something about their setting for ministry, perspective or passion. This was followed by a chaired discussion about one or two specific local social issues and opportunities, looking to identify areas for potential collaboration. After a few meetings, the format evolved to include some short formal presentations about particular projects – for example Caring for Ex-Offenders (CFEO) and the Lighthouse Group were early invitees, who

came to explain their work and the opportunities for churches to get involved.

By the end of the first year, the Breakfasts had grown to about 20 people participating each time, a mix of church leaders and local charities.

An analysis of attendance at the four Breakfasts held in 2010-11, shows that a total of 29 different people attended, with half of them attending regularly and half coming only once. A fairly committed ‘core’ of local church leaders were joined by a different mix of people each time, from other churches and also a number of charities, ensuring new networking opportunities each time.

### 2.3.2 Developing new projects

As a direct follow-up to the Breakfasts, a smaller group of the core church leaders met together in ‘business meetings’ to discuss joint working through one or two specific social action projects. The

“  
**BY THE MIDDLE  
OF 2011, THERE  
WAS A CLEAR  
INTEREST IN  
ESTABLISHING A  
FOODBANK TO  
SERVE THE AREA**

possibilities were actively engaged with, usually by drawing in an expert or leader of a ‘franchise’ social ministry. A local mapping exercise was undertaken, identifying needs. By the middle of 2011, there was a clear interest in establishing a Foodbank to serve the area, motivated by church leaders’ direct experiences of local people going hungry.

The Shoreditch Group Co-ordinator, Helen, was initially funded to work three days per

week, so she was a resource for the Group. In addition to organising the Breakfasts, liaising with a range of social transformation ministries, overseeing the mapping and making introductions, she offered support to some individual churches in developing social action projects based out of the church. After a business meeting at which a number of

churches committed themselves to setting up a Foodbank, she also began to research how one might be established.

Trussell Trust Foodbanks already existed in Islington and had recently become established in Tower Hamlets, but not in Hackney, by some measurements the second most deprived local authority area in England. The group of leaders who wanted to set up a Foodbank were encouraged to proceed by the local council and decided on the Trussell Trust model which was whole Borough-based, thus immediately stretching the initial ‘reach’ of The Shoreditch Group.

### 2.3.3 Adding capacity

In addition to Breakfasts and project development, a further part of the original Shoreditch Group jigsaw was involvement with Mission Year. This project recruited young Christians to spend a year working with inner-city churches on social action projects, living together in community and receiving teaching and support through the year. Originating in America, it was established in London in 2010 by the ACT Network.

The aims of the Shoreditch Group and Mission Year fitted well together. Boosting local churches’ capacity with Mission Year participants would increase the chances of being able to run more social action projects, as many inner-city churches are small and stretched for resources (both people and money). Similarly, if Mission Year was to be a success, its participants would need to be placed with churches which were serious about wanting to undertake transformational social action as part of mission and thus be able to provide relevant work that needed doing. The two initiatives seemed to reinforce each other.

For a couple of years, Mission Year provided up to 9 energetic young Christians each year across several churches in the area and fitted well with what The Shoreditch Group was trying to achieve. It provided some of the capacity to deliver some of the social actions which had been identified as important.

Mission Year then experienced some funding difficulties and contracted for a while, so wasn’t able to realise its full potential with The Shoreditch Group. It is now up and running again, operated by CRM



(a Christian Ministry based in East London), although it works more widely across the area now and, to distinguish it from the project in the USA, has been renamed Mission 365.

## 2.4 A MATURING NETWORK: 2012-2014

The initial hope was that The Shoreditch Group might have been funded by a small group of philanthropists – perhaps giving £5,000 each per year. Other than two generous initial benefactors, this did not transpire, but at the end of the first year, funding was secured from the Bishop of London's Mission Fund for three years (tapering down each year). This has supported The Shoreditch Group from the autumn of 2011 through to 2014, giving it greater financial stability.

The Group's initiator, Nat Wei, having been closely involved with strategy and direction to start with, was enabled to move on to other projects at this point, but the rest of The Shoreditch Group structure remained much the same, as it bedded down and began to mature as a network.

### 2.4.1 *Breakfasts*

The networking and planning Breakfasts have continued on a regular basis from late 2010 through into 2014, rotating around different cafes in the area. Attendance has typically been 20 people, although sometimes higher, up to 35 people.

The format of the Breakfasts themselves has remained very similar – business-like meetings with networking opportunities (and coffee!) – although the content has evolved to be more structured: each Breakfast now typically has a unifying theme and there are two or three short presentations on the same theme from relevant organisations – for example whole person care or personal debt.

The range of people at these Breakfasts widened, with many more organisations and charities now joining in (church leaders currently represent less than half the attendees). The regular 'core' who would always come to a Breakfast, has also reduced, and with some turnover each year.

It is not possible to list all of the organisations which attended the Breakfasts. The churches have included Anglican, Catholic, Baptist, New Frontiers and many other free churches. The charities have been a broad mix – such as Arch 76 (a project that provides friendship opportunities, in a creative environment, to vulnerable women in a refurbished railway arch), City Gateway (a City-run charity benefiting young people and women in Tower Hamlets through training, apprenticeships and social enterprise opportunities) and Tower Hamlets Street Pastors (Christians out and about on the streets at night to care, listen and talk) – in every instance the charities have been active in ministering in the local area focused on by The Shoreditch Group.

An attempt was made to establish a regular 'core team' of half a dozen leaders in 2012 to meet regularly to expand the Group's governance, but this only met a couple of times. It was difficult to secure that level of time commitment from leaders who were already very busy and were content for the Group to continue as it was. In practice, the Group has been managed by Adam and Helen, with support from the Contextual Theology Centre.

### 2.4.2 *Setting up Hackney Foodbank*

As noted above, in the first six months of 2012, the Group Co-ordinator invested much of her time in developing Hackney Foodbank, including raising the funding, and helping to set it up.

Hackney Foodbank launched as the 200th Trussell Trust Foodbank in the UK in September 2012, with a project manager appointed to run it. Hackney Foodbank has established itself quickly. After 18 months, it has opened four distribution centres around the borough and is working on a fifth – each based in a different church. Nearly 100 organisations now refer people to the Foodbank. In 2013, Hackney Foodbank distributed 16 tonnes of food to feed over 2,300 people, including nearly 700 children, and demand has continued to grow. The food was donated by a large and growing network of over 30 churches (of all denominations) and many schools, children's centres, businesses and community organisations across the borough.

The Shoreditch Group Co-ordinator played a key role in helping

to establish the Foodbank, and the Group's network of churches provided an important starting point for getting the Foodbank started – supporting its development, helping with collecting food, providing volunteers and establishing distribution centres within churches. The Foodbank project has also helped to connect more churches into The Shoreditch Group, and given many churches the chance to get more involved in serving their community.

Local parochial charitable giving started Hackney Foodbank going and now, Hackney Council is providing £30,000 per year to support the Foodbank.

Many churches remain closely involved with it, with some represented on the board of trustees. After the start-up phase Shoreditch Group Co-ordinator Helen's time input reduced significantly. She is now a trustee of the Foodbank, but it is now a fully independent charity.

### ***2.4.3 Piloting Whole Person Care***

In the spring of 2013, the Co-ordinator moved on to help develop a new project on 'whole person care', in collaboration with a GP Surgery in Bethnal Green where the partners are all Christians – the Mission Practice. Thanks to involvement with The Shoreditch Group the Mission Practice has now had a part-time Community Networker, as a pilot project, from the summer of 2013, with a year's funding.

The Mission Practice had been wanting to develop a new approach to 'whole person care' – care based on physical, emotional and spiritual needs. A significant number of patients seek medical help for complaints which are complex and often better dealt with in social settings and with non-medical interventions. The Practice was interested in exploring how the local community, especially social action initiatives based in and through local churches, could better support people who need care. This project seeks to bridge that gap.

The 12 month pilot project has involved a Community Networker (who is trained in public health) working at the Mission Practice for 16 hours per week. The worker is employed by St Peter's, Bethnal Green but works at the Practice. The GPs refer patients to her when

they believe that the patient might benefit from greater social support or engagement. The Networker talks to the patient in a 30 minute consultation and works with them to identify a local project that they may benefit from being involved with. To make this possible, the Networker has developed a 'live' database of local community, voluntary and statutory projects and services which she is confident of using. She then supports the patient in making the initial contact.

Referrals are made to a wide variety of sometimes surprising organisations, including befriending services, local gyms, ESOL classes, the local City Farm and many other community projects.

The Shoreditch Group Co-ordinator worked with the Practice to help develop this project, to bid for funds to enable it to happen and in evaluating the work regularly with the partner who took the lead on this in the Practice. After the project was established, its services have also been advertised through The Shoreditch Group, and recommendations been sought for projects and services to add to the database.

The plan is for further funding to be secured to enable the project to continue and develop further 'whole person care' services.

### ***2.4.4 Extending the CitySafe initiative***

Another project which The Shoreditch Group has helped to facilitate is the extension into the Shoreditch area of CitySafe – an initiative arising from member organisations of London Citizens. Some churches within the Shoreditch Group are active members of London Citizens, the community organising network.

CitySafe is a community safety project which works with local shop owners and other institutions to establish 'City Safe Havens' – places (like shops) where young people can flee to and find sanctuary if threatened with violence or intimidation on the street.

Grassroots 'listening' amongst schools and churches had identified the Hackney Road (the border between the Boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Hackney) as a place which many young people perceived and experienced as dangerous. In co-operation with the Metropolitan Police, and thanks to funding from a charitable trust connected with St Peter's,

Bethnal Green, a part-time CitySafe organiser was recruited to work with local churches, schools and shopkeepers in the area to extend this initiative. A Deputy Commissioner of The Metropolitan Police called the CitySafe Zone which emerged from this work ‘a model for community policing’.

### 2.4.5 Other projects

A handful of other projects have also been initiated by churches within The Shoreditch Group. Experience here underlines how hard it can be to establish initiatives in a sustainable way – not all survive. In the next section we reflect upon this.

In 2012, Church for the City (a New Frontiers church and member of The Shoreditch Group) piloted a debt advice project (partnering with Christians Against Poverty), establishing a CAP Centre. The project ran for a year and helped a number of people in debt – addressing a significant local issue. It was supported by a Mission Year participant based at the church. However, it was difficult to find the capacity or funding to sustain the project, so it was closed after a year.

A different approach in relation to personal debt has also been tried. A free half-day money management workshop ‘LiveSmart’, originally developed at St Paul’s, Shadwell was piloted at St Peter’s, Bethnal Green in spring 2013. There are possibilities of replicating this, although this has not been done to date.

A TimeBank project was also initiated by Kahaila, another active church partner in The Shoreditch Group at the time. This got up and running, but the TimeBank did not catch on, could not be sustained and came to an end. Kahaila runs a very successful coffee shop on Brick Lane, which has been a great venue for Shoreditch Group Breakfasts.

The Shoreditch Group has also used its networks to promote opportunities run by others. For example, Freeformers is a social enterprise which teaches business how to build social media apps and which uses some of its time to train and mentor young people with the same skills. In early 2013, the Shoreditch Group used its networks to identify a dozen local teenagers to spend a day being trained by Freeformers.

## 2.5 FUNDING

The core cost of running the Shoreditch Group has primarily been limited to the cost of employing a part-time Co-ordinator. In the first three years, Autumn 2010 to Summer 2013, the running cost of The Shoreditch Group was approximately £25,000 per year.

Since the Autumn of 2013, the Co-ordinator has worked on The Shoreditch Group for 10 hours per week, leading to a correspondingly reduced running cost of approximately £12,000 per year – including all costs and overheads, etc.

In the first year, part of the initial funding came from a couple of generous philanthropists (‘Angel’ social investors) who donated £5,000 each to get the ball rolling. This has been added to with charitable grants from the Porter’s Trust and the Henry Fawcett Fund and a three year commitment from 2011-2014 by the Bishop of London’s Mission Fund.

The individual projects which have ‘spun off’ of the Group’s work have been funded separately.

- The Hackney Foodbank was funded by a number of sources – all three Hackney Parochial Charities, the Cinnamon Network, the Church and Community Fund, as well as individual and church donations and Hackney Council, noted above.
- The CitySafe worker was funded from various sources, including the Henry Fawcett Fund, the Porter’s Trust and the Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC).
- The Mission Practice Pilot project costs approximately £14,000 for a year, two-thirds funded by a Church Urban Fund Health and Belief Grant and one-third funded from the Practice’s own funds.

And that is The Shoreditch Group story, so far.



---

## 3 THE SHOREDITCH GROUP: ASSESSING THE IMPACT

---

In this section, we consider the benefits and impact of The Shoreditch Group, as well as some of the issues that have occurred along the way.



## 3.1 THE BENEFITS

The Shoreditch Group has delivered a range of benefits to churches and their communities in the area.

### 3.1.1 *A match-making network*

Some of the more regular attenders over the years have highlighted the great value of the networking opportunity that the Breakfasts have offered. It has allowed people to really connect and helped to build some strong working relationships.

When the Breakfasts started, a number of the church leaders were new to the area. The meetings brought leaders together from across the area, across boundaries and across denominations, giving them the opportunity to build relationships, as well as with some of the other organisations working in the area. Many have gone on to work together on other initiatives.

Much of the value of the Breakfasts comes from the proactive development of relationships with mission-minded churches and charities working in the area and then bringing them together with the intention of ‘match-making’ needs and opportunities. They are intentional meetings, where the Group hopes to act as a catalyst to new initiatives and partnerships. Both Rev’d Adam and Helen are natural networkers and ‘matchmakers’.

Much thought goes into who to invite, and time is spent between Breakfasts meeting one-to-one with people and identifying needs and opportunities. The themes that are chosen reflect what participants have expressed an interest in, after a process of listening.

The ‘greater Shoreditch’ geographical area is large enough to include a fair number of churches, but small enough to provide a clear focus, and for participants to feel that they are meeting people working in the same area.

### 3.1.2 *A growing and varied network*

Over the three and half years that the Shoreditch Group has been

running Breakfasts, 100 different people have participated, representing 38 different local churches, of varying traditions and denominations, and 25 different charities, nearly all working locally. On average, just over half of the attendees at any particular Breakfast are from different churches, and the rest are from local Christian charities or agencies.

The majority – over 80% - come once, twice or three times but are not regular attenders. A smaller ‘core’ attend fairly regularly, although the membership of this group evolves over time. So, the network is not a ‘club’ with lots of regular members, more of an ongoing service to the area into which people dip in and out.

### 3.1.3 *An informative network*

Our research interviewees also confirmed the value of being informed about new projects and initiatives at the Breakfasts. Even if the project is not of direct relevance, often some of the ideas or practices within it may be. They can also just be inspiring and encouraging too.

### 3.1.4 *Stronger community organising*

A number of churches also got to know more about the work of Shoreditch Citizens (at that time a Chapter within London Citizens, the community organising network) through The Shoreditch Group and have since become active members. So, another tangible benefit of the Breakfasts has been the strengthening of church-based community organising in the area. These churches have worked with other member institutions of London Citizens to participate in a number of local campaigns and projects, including CitySafe.

### 3.1.5 *New social action projects*

The Shoreditch Group has played an active role in establishing several new social action projects to benefit the community. This is partly through the time that the Co-ordinator has been able to invest in project development and fundraising, and partly through the active support of the churches and charities involved in the Group’s network.

Through the **Hackney Foodbank** over 30 churches of all denominations are working together to feed more than 1,000 households per year. Over 30 volunteers each week support the Foodbank's administration, warehousing and distribution. Many more help with collections. The Foodbank is bringing direct relief to some of the poorest people in Hackney, as this testimony from the project illustrates:

*A recent former client, Marie, said "[Foodbank] changed my life." She came to the Foodbank on the run from an abusive partner, who had brought her to the country 10 years ago and virtually kept her prisoner in their home. Having spent the night with her son moving from night bus to night bus to keep warm rather than return to her flat, she had nothing. They helped her with food, but also by referring her to a solicitor and a housing agency that could help. It didn't seem like much, but within a month she was re-housed and granted asylum, having gone from feeling near death to being filled with hope.*

“  
A RECENT  
FORMER CLIENT,  
MARIE, SAID  
“[FOODBANK]  
CHANGED MY  
LIFE”

At the **Mission Practice**, after seven months, the Community Networker had developed a new database of local projects and had 86 patients referred to her. The project has been mainly helping people struggling with mental health issues or loneliness, but also people who want to lose weight or have practical issues (like parenting or housing) that are impacting on their wellbeing. So, for example, the Networker relates that:

*A 48-year-old woman suffering with depression and social isolation and also a recent family bereavement was referred to me. After a consultation, the woman agreed to have a go at volunteering in a couple of projects, including a local City Farm. Six months later she was still actively involved as a volunteer and had begun to take on some responsibilities as a group leader in one of the charities. These kind of activities can help people to make new friends and also build*

*self-esteem and confidence.*

Through **CitySafe**, 16 new City Safe Havens (so far) have been designated along the Hackney Road.

### 3.1.6 Mission Year

Since its inception in 2010 Mission Year brought over 20 energetic and committed young people to live in East London and to serve the local communities through churches. Many Mission Year 'graduates' stayed on and are still living and serving in East London, helping to lead churches and social action projects.

## 3.2 BUT IT WAS NOT ALL PLAIN SAILING

It is important to know that running The Shoreditch Group has been hard work and that not everything has worked out as intended. We would pick out four points to highlight this.

Firstly, when comparing the story of The Shoreditch Group with its original aims, the ability and capacity of churches to take on new social action projects was overestimated. Particularly in the inner city, where many churches are under-resourced, it seems that there is a limit to the frequency with which churches can absorb or contribute to new activities. The 'busyness' of church leaders and their limited 'bandwidth' to develop new initiatives has also been a constraining factor. Developing and running new projects has proved possible, but it needs to be at a sustainable pace.

Related to this, starting projects has proved easier than keeping them going. Not all of the Group's projects have been sustained. Social action projects are more likely to survive when the running costs are low and when there are a number of churches willing to support and contribute.

Secondly, the original vision was to see Mission Year recruiting and providing young interns into churches on an annual basis, to boost capacity. For various reasons, this stalled for a while, and although it is back up and running, the focus of the organisation is broader now. There is a 'gap' remaining in the needs of churches in the area

for additional capacity to help develop, organise and run projects and initiatives.

Thirdly, the original intentions included the hope that private philanthropists might part-fund The Shoreditch Group with modest donations, to enhance its sustainability. Despite some early promise, this has not happened. The economic climate has perhaps not been ideal for such plans in recent years, but this remains an area that is perhaps worth exploring further now that The Shoreditch Group has a track record.

Finally, the nature of The Shoreditch Group itself has also evolved in unexpected ways – this is not a criticism, more an observation. The original expectation amongst some of the church leaders present at the genesis of The Shoreditch Group was that it would be a network with regularly attending members. In practice, the ‘regular core’ reduced over time and the number of irregular attenders has grown significantly. In practice, as the network has matured, it has become less of a club for some and more of a catalytic service for many.

### 3.3 THE OVERALL IMPACT?

The original aims of The Shoreditch Group were to “tackle poverty and build community” in the Shoreditch area, a place with significant social needs. It aimed to achieve this by supporting the Church, in innovative ways, “to engage in mercy and justice”, sharing its faith as it did so.

The evidence shows that The Shoreditch Group has enabled a range of positive outcomes:

- directly helped over 30 churches to mobilise their own people and resources to contribute to a number of social action projects.
- reached across denominations and been ecumenical in its work, bringing churches together, leading to a strong network.
- enabled new projects which have directly addressed poverty, hunger, debt, health and safety.
- The Shoreditch Group has achieved all of this with relatively modest core running costs.

What impact this initiative has had upon the growth of the church in the area is rather harder to disentangle and beyond this piece of research. What can be said is that many of the churches participating in, and contributing to, the Group’s work are more engaged with their communities than they were a few years ago. Many of them are growing too. The nature of, and reasons for, church growth in deprived areas is perhaps a topic for another report.

And what about innovation? The Shoreditch Group has largely relied on a network of willing partners, a proactive Co-ordinator and sometimes an injection of extra capacity (interns) and these tools are arguably not novel. Yet, the context and purpose to which they have been put are perhaps more unusual. They are certainly not normal business for most church networks, so there may be a wider application for this way of operating across the Church.



---

## 4 TRANSFERABLE LEARNING: LESSONS FOR OTHERS

---

In this section, we try to distil what we have learnt about how The Shoreditch Group has operated and share this for anyone interested in doing something similar. Every area is different so whilst there are transferable lessons, there are also lots of ways in which other initiatives would rightly and necessarily be different. Every initiative must respond to its own context.



## 4.1 WHEN MIGHT A GROUP BE HELPFUL?

Wherever there are several churches interested in increasing their engagement with their local community and their impact upon local issues, then collaboration is likely to be of value.

We would always encourage an open and ecumenical approach. Comprehensive membership is not essential- such initiatives are ‘coalitions of the willing’, they don’t have to involve everyone.

Our experience is that a Group needs to operate across a geographical area which is small enough for people to identify with and feel some common involvement with, but large enough to include a variety of churches and organisations. A single neighbourhood is too small, a city or local authority area is too large.

## 4.2 WHAT DO YOU WANT TO ACHIEVE?

Your Group will need to agree its core purpose. The Shoreditch Group’s core vision was to see churches mobilising and sharing their resources to promote social transformation. As we have written elsewhere (in our report ‘Just Church’, 2013), we believe that ‘doing mercy, acting justly and sharing our faith’ are all essential components of a church’s work and are entirely compatible aims.

Many variations are possible though. An effective Group will respond to its context. It may be that there is a dynamic business community within the area. Might there be ways to work with them? Most areas have a wide range of public services and voluntary services operating within them – are there priorities for collaboration here?

In addition to a mapping exercise to better understand local needs, the key tool employed by The Shoreditch Group was to encourage church leaders to conduct a ‘listening campaign’ both personally and with the church amidst its community. This process is intended to establish what the real needs of the community actually are, rather than projecting needs upon it. The findings of such listening are fed back in the Breakfast meetings and in one to one meetings between the leaders.

There may then be a long list of needs but a Group does not need to achieve everything, or do it all at once. Having a clear goal which is

relevant to the area and which captures people’s imaginations will help to keep it on track.

## 4.3 WHAT ARE THE ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS?

The underlying principles of The Shoreditch Group are really founded on the practices of ‘asset-based community development’ (sometimes known as ‘ABCD’).

This is an approach which does not just look at an area’s needs and problems, but which focuses on the assets in an area and how they can be best used to bring about positive change. Even the most deprived communities have assets – space and buildings, people with skills and knowledge, links and relationships to external institutions, even some funding. Most communities (and churches) have more assets that are of value to others than they realise. The potential for change multiplies when communities and churches come together to work collaboratively. Much can be achieved if assets are recognised and brought into productive use. This is the essence of what the Shoreditch Group has been trying to do.

We believe that, working together, we are greater than the sum of our parts.

The Shoreditch Group’s model of operation is simple and not very expensive, and therefore amenable to use in a wide range of settings. Its main ingredients are:

- **A NETWORK** – the starting point is at least a handful of like-minded churches (across the denominations) and other Christian organisations, willing to work together, plus sometimes other agencies too if they are willing to collaborate (‘people of peace’).
- **A MATCH-MAKER** – the network needs at least one gifted networker/facilitator who is happy to serve the Group by thinking about who might need to meet who. This does not need to be a formal role, but someone should be doing it.

- **A PART-TIME CO-ORDINATOR** – someone needs to be available for at least a few hours each week to organise the meetings, establish new links, develop projects and fundraise. The Shoreditch Group's Co-ordinator's hours have varied from 10 hours per week to 3 days per week.
- **EXTRA CAPACITY** - additional 'doing' capacity in the form of interns or volunteers within churches can make a significant difference, especially in churches with limited resources. This can be difficult to organise, and is not always essential, but is an important ingredient worth considering.

## 4.4 DON'T WE DO THIS ALREADY?

Such collaborations may already be happening in your area. The challenge may simply be to join in. There is no value in duplicating an existing service.

However, our experience is that this way of operating is not common within many church contexts.

The kind of Group we describe here is open, dynamic, relational and collaborative. It is not a committee or a club with regular members. There is very little, if any, paperwork for participants, and few formalities. It is ecumenical. Above all, it has a specific **outward-looking purpose and goal**. It is focused on a geographical area small enough to build relationships within.

We suggest that the Church and its mission would benefit from more collaborations of this nature.



---

## 5 DIAKONIA AND URBAN MISSION

---

In this section, we consider the work of the Shoreditch Group with a theological perspective.

## 5.1 ACTS 6 AND THE URBAN CHURCH TODAY

*Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.' What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.*

Acts 6.1-6 (NRSV)

The challenge described in Acts 6 will be familiar to any inner-city church leader.

Clergy have to combine (i) the tasks of ministry of Word and Sacrament within the church, (ii) pastoral care of people, often in very difficult circumstances, (iii) acting for justice and sharing the faith beyond the church's walls and (iv) maintaining the infrastructure of the church, often (e.g. in the Church of England) with governance structures which assume a level of unpaid lay leadership which may not be available. All too often, this over-burdens those in leadership positions, and prevents the wider church from carrying out all four tasks as effectively as possible.

As we read in Acts 6, the early church established the order of deacons alongside that of the apostles to avoid two kinds of 'neglect': '*neglect of the word of God*' by the apostles, and *neglect of people in material need* (in this case, the Hellenistic widows) by the wider church.

In our *Just Church* report, we highlighted the inter-dependence of proclamation of God's word and practical care of those in need – an

inter-dependence which is emphasised in Old and New Testaments alike:

*Worship without mutual care is a parody of true communion (Isaiah 58.6-12; 1 Corinthians 11.17-26; James 2.14-17). By the same token, a church which promotes mutual care but neglects worship is doomed to failure. Without receiving from God, we have nothing distinctive to give. If we do not begin by being fed, we will be acting in our own power, not responding to the gift of life and love poured out in Jesus Christ.*

Today, as in the first months of the Church's life, we need to deploy our resources prayerfully and effectively so that proclamation and practical care each get the attention they deserve.

## 5.2 THE SHOREDITCH GROUP AS DIAKONIA

In many churches, the diaconate has become a 'staging-post' on the way to other kinds of ministry, rather than the distinctive calling envisaged in Acts 6.

For example, in the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches, the apostolic ministry is exercised by bishops with their college of priests, and all priests are ordained deacon while in training.

In these and other churches, there have been moves to recover a 'distinctive diaconate' – that is, people whose specific calling is to the kinds of ministry the early church assigned to its first deacons.

As an ecumenical, 'inter-church' organisation, the work of The Shoreditch Group does not bear directly on issues of church order within particular denominations. Rather, it points to ways in which all denominations can avoid the neglect of the Word of God and the neglect of those in need which arose in the early church. With the increasing emphasis now being placed on the church's social ministries – and the increasing recognition in Government of the capacity and commitment of faith communities in this regard – it is vital that the Church responds in ways which do not simply add to the burdens of already over-stretched congregational leaders.

As Acts 6 reminds us, addressing this challenge is a Biblical and missional imperative.



## 6 CONCLUSIONS

### 6.1 WHERE DOES THE SHOREDITCH GROUP GO NEXT?

We are confident that The Shoreditch Group and its many partners have contributed to the social regeneration of the area in which they are placed and serve.

After nearly four years, The Shoreditch Group has been taking stock of its work, partly informed by this research. A decision has already been made to reduce the running costs to improve financial sustainability, (although this also reduces the Co-ordinator's capacity to engage in the development of new projects).

We remain confident that much work remains to be done in mobilising resources to meet the many needs in the 'greater Shoreditch' area. As people constantly come and go, it is clear that a proactive network can still add value in linking new people in, and sparking new ideas and collaborations.

In its slimmed down form we hope to keep the ball rolling. We also hope to explore new avenues of work. There is great potential for collaboration with the business community in East London. A widening range of themes at the Breakfasts could also be rolled out, to respond to emerging needs.

### 6.2 WHERE DOES THE CHURCH GO NEXT?

A core part of the Church's mission is to act justly, show mercy and share its faith. This requires active and thoughtful engagement with communities it is a part of. The more effective the Church can be in doing this, the better.

In our experience, networks which are open, dynamic, relational and collaborative can be effective in enabling change. They can also happily co-exist with current church structures.

We suggest that more urban neighbourhoods may benefit from network initiatives like the Shoreditch Group. We encourage the Church, across all its denominations, to consider how it can best support and make resources available for effective collaboration in developing social ministries that promote the common good.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Any attempt to tell the story of the Shoreditch Group must begin with a full acknowledgement that it represents the hard work of many churches and charities in and around the Shoreditch area. There are too many to name, but this is their story.

We would also like to acknowledge and thank those who have funded the Shoreditch Group in its first four years – including the Bishop of London’s Mission Fund, the Henry Fawcett Fund, the Porter’s Trust and the initial ‘Angel’ investors. This is their story too.

We would like to thank the Bishop of London’s Mission Fund in particular for kindly supporting this research, with the aim of learning from experience and sharing this more widely.

We would also like to thank those who gave their time and participated in our research as consultees:

Rev’d Adam Atkinson	St Peter’s Bethnal Green
Laura Bagley	Arch 76, co-leader
Colin Crawley	Church Resource Ministries (CRM) UK
Mike Hewett	Church for the City, pastor/church planter
Rev’d Andrew Jones	Grace Church Hackney
Helen Moules	Shoreditch Group Co-ordinator
	Hackney Foodbank Trustee
Rev’d Paul Unsworth	Kahaila, Brick Lane
Dr. Louise Vaughan	Mission Practice, Bethnal Green
Lord (Nat) Wei	Baron Wei of Shoreditch, social entrepreneur

Finally, thanks to Canon Dr Angus Ritchie for the theological input in Section 5, and advice more generally on the direction of the research.



THE  
**CONTEXTUAL  
THEOLOGY**  
CENTRE

*Equipping churches to engage  
with their communities*