

Participatory citizenship:

how community power can bring together a fractured nation,
build a relational society and revitalise our democracy

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“The era just ending was governed by economic and social doctrines which have caused us to become the most regionally unequal country in the developed world, with a range of chronic social challenges. The era now opening must address these challenges by putting communities at the heart of policy making... a wholly new paradigm is possible in which community power replaces the dominance of remote public and private sector bureaucracies.”

- Danny Kruger MP, letter to Prime Minister Boris Johnson, September 2020²

“I don’t think we can fix these systems, but I think we can reinvent them, with human connection at their heart. When people feel supported by strong relationships, change happens. And when we make collaboration and connection feel simple and easy, people want to join in. Yet our welfare state does not try to connect us to one another, despite the abundant potential of our relationships. Most of our services... are aimed at managing risk and getting by.”

- Dr Hilary Cottam in the Guardian, 21st June 2018³

2020, the year of the COVID-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter and increasing urgency around the climate crisis, has led many to question whether the ‘social contract’ – the shared beliefs, norms, values, assumptions and agreements that undergird our societies and the legislation that governs them – is due a re-think.⁴ As Christopher Watkin outlines,⁵ modern social contract theory tends to focus narrowly on one relationship: that between the free, autonomous, rational individual seeking to preserve their personal liberty as far as is possible whilst establishing and maintaining order in

¹ This research essay was written as part of Jubilee Centre’s SAGE Graduate programme 2020-21

² “Levelling up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant”, a report for government by Danny Kruger MP, September 2020, p. 7, accessed at <https://www.dannykruger.org.uk/communities-report>

³ Hillary Cottam, “More money will not fix our broken welfare state. We need to reinvent it”, *The Guardian*, Thu 21 Jun 2018, accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jun/21/broken-welfare-state-reinvent-it>

⁴ Notable examples include the U.N. Secretary General, the World Bank, Joe Biden, Extinction Rebellion and the Financial Times. Global Google searches for the term hit a peak in September 2020 (<https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=social%20contract>).

⁵ Christopher Watkin, “Christianity and the Social Contract”, <https://www.jubilee-centre.org/blog/christianity-and-the-social-contract>

society; and the state that they inevitably have to concede their liberty to so that such order can be secured. The logic of forming the contract in the first place is formulated from the point of view of each individual – that it is in each of their own rational self-interests to agree with others that government is necessary, not so that they can form a political community, but because that is the state of things that will best secure their own individual pursuit of safety, wealth or pleasure. However, the value of community and civil society is missing. The pandemic, perceived racial injustice, and the need for co-operative action have exposed the shortfalls of this modern individualism; we have become distrustful of one another, of our governments, of the media, and of big business, with fatal consequences.

There is, however, a growing appetite for, and an opportunity to, reshape the social contract along relational lines, a movement for community power led by the likes of Hilary Cottam and picked up on in last year's important report, 'Levelling up our communities'. Danny Kruger MP was commissioned by the Prime Minister to explore how Britain could harness the extraordinary outpouring of community spirit and volunteer effort seen in response to the pandemic, and his response was to champion many of the ideas and policies of this movement. Among other things, he commends community power, innovations in deliberative democracy, and a new deal for faith groups to partner with government on social issues: three ideas that this essay will examine.

Such a shift must be more than just a political project of state reform. To build a more relational society, there is an onus on each of us as 'citizens' to play a part in building the new 'social covenant' that Kruger calls for. We must transform ourselves from passive recipients and consumers of public goods to active contributors; from isolated and self-seeking individuals to a community of loving neighbours that can build relationships across differences. A full understanding of citizenship is essential to empower and encourage ordinary people to step forward and participate in public life. As well as being a positive force in their communities, these people of power can also build pressure on the government to make good on its promises to level up.

Yet, the role of the state in this reform must not be missed. We have been on similar ground before: David Cameron's 'Big Society' initiative failed because its messaging, at a time of austerity and of the most significant cuts to public services for a generation, was all wrong. It was received as an attempt to get communities to pick up the slack where government was unwilling to provide, rather than genuinely empowering and facilitating communities to enact change by transferring power and resources to them. For this present movement to succeed and not just be seen as another shirking of state responsibilities, or a vague idea about 'people power', or a political project to achieve a certain agenda through the back door, then the messaging must be framed correctly. Government organisations must be willing to hand over the tools and resources needed for the people to deliver change to be encouraged to step forward in the first place. Unless citizens can see that they genuinely have the power to effect change, they will understandably focus their attention elsewhere and continue to be passive actors in public life, engaging once every four years to vote while all the while feeling that the Westminster elite does not understand nor represent them.

In this report I am therefore proposing actions for both bottom-up and top-down change, accounting for the role of both state and citizen in empowering communities, and arguing that it is the identity of 'citizen' that is key for transforming our relationships, both with the state and with those around us. I will connect this agenda to the Old Testament vision for the nation of Israel, within the Jubilee Centre's framework of 'relationism', and emphasise Kruger's call for churches to play a key role in the regeneration of civil society.

The citizen and the state

Political scientist Richard Bellamy defines citizenship as ‘a condition of civic equality,’ consisting of ‘membership of a political community where all citizens can determine the terms of social cooperation on an equal basis. This status not only secures equal rights to the enjoyment of the collective goods provided by political association but also involves equal duties to promote and sustain them – including the good of democratic citizenship itself.’⁶ He identifies three components to citizenship – **membership** of a political community, **rights** that can be claimed against the state, and political **participation**, with the latter being ‘the indispensable glue holding them together,’⁷ without which democracy is reduced to ‘an inefficient mechanism for individuals to pursue their private interests’.⁸

Following Bellamy, I propose that a re-emphasis of our collective identity as citizens, in particular the invitation to participate in public life, is necessary to overcome the divisions in our societies and empower citizens to exercise their collective agency and effect change in their communities. Citizenship is a highly relational identity that binds us to one another in pursuit of the common good. It requires that we are not passive consumers of state services, manipulated and powerless voters, nor isolated and selfish individuals, but active citizens with responsibilities and obligations to one another. Where a rights-based system inevitably leads us into conflict with one another, citizenship reminds us that rights come with responsibilities. Where individualism leads us to retreat further into ourselves and serve only our own interests, citizenship challenges us to look out for others, value relationships, and consider the impact of our actions upon the social body. Where tribalism and polarisation can lead us to hate those who are different, citizenship calls us together around a common story, purpose and unity.

Christianity has a long tradition of thinking about citizenship, and while Scripture has plenty to teach us on both membership and rights, it is this separation of participation from membership and rights that I will focus on as a root cause underlying our divided society, our failing public services, and our disillusionment with democracy. It will suffice for now to observe that while Christians have their primary identity as ‘citizens of heaven’,⁹ our role on earth is to act as ambassadors of that heavenly reign, manifesting the values of God’s kingdom ‘on earth as it is in heaven’,¹⁰ so we should ‘seek the welfare of’¹¹ the culture in which we are placed. As Jennifer Marshall puts it, ‘the exercise of citizenship is a matter of stewardship for the Christian,’¹² and part of the Eden vocation. Just as the Law was given specifically to the nation of Israel precisely so that they might be a ‘light unto the nations’,¹³ an image of God’s wisdom for the whole world, so too the Church, filled by the Holy Spirit, is to reflect God’s love into the world, not only through preaching, evangelism, and traditionally ‘spiritual’ matters, but in how we live, situated in place and organising our collective life by the same practical wisdom.

Avoiding debates around formal legal citizenship, nationalism and identity, I am defining as a ‘citizen’ anyone who belongs to a particular national political community, lives under its laws, and acts within its territory. Of course, those with formal legal citizenship will have more reasons to take on the challenge of participation, but I do not wish to exclude migrants, expats, refugees and others from the

⁶ Richard Bellamy, *Citizenship: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 17

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23

⁹ Philippians 3:20. Bible quotations NIV unless otherwise stated.

¹⁰ Matthew 6:10

¹¹ Jeremiah 29:7, ESV

¹² Jennifer Marshall, “The Christian Calling to Citizenship”, *The Gospel Coalition*, October 24, 2012,

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/a-christian-calling-to-citizenship/>

¹³ Isaiah 49:6

invitation to participate in public life. I am also discussing citizenship in terms of belonging to a particular place, with a focus on Britain, so I am not addressing the question of 'global' citizenship, the challenge to nation-states, globalisation, and the role of international organisations. I will also not be examining the grounds for obedience to worldly authority or the case for citizens to resist oppressive governments in the name of justice – although all of the above are of course worth further exploration.

A divided Britain?

Citizenship is important because, as well as alienating us from politics, modern individualism divides us from one another, encourages self-seeking behaviour, and creates geographical divides between 'haves' and 'have-nots', reducing the role of community and the need for a shared story that drives us in a common purpose. Contact, story and purpose are not only key indicators of relational proximity,¹⁴ they are also essential to engendering the political will for taxpayer-funded public services. The growth of the internet and social media as the new public space for political discussion has further removed our public interactions from the place of committed relationships – particularly from those that disagree with us. As we divide further politically, the dual effects of online anonymity and the creation of social media echo chambers can drive an enormous wedge not only between those who disagree on issues, but those who identify in different ways. This simultaneous draining of civil society and community alongside the increasing toxification and division of the online space means that people rarely build relationships or even speak to those who are different to them beyond shouting at them on the internet. Those who hold different views are not seen as people with dignity with the right to hold differing opinions, but are vilified as evil. Those on opposing sides simply cannot understand one another, let alone appreciate the other's point of view and respectfully disagree. Change moves at the speed of trust¹⁵ and if we cannot trust one another, then we cannot partner for change.

Cass Sunstein once designed a social experiment to demonstrate the danger of only interacting with those you agree with; the effect of grouping people into largely homogenous groups to discuss controversial issues was to make participants more set and extreme in their pre-existing views.¹⁶ Deliberation as equals in heterogenous groups, on the other hand, has been repeatedly shown to have the opposite effect of moderating views, increasing understanding of the opposing point of view, and even changing one's mind.¹⁷ The 2016 Brexit referendum and subsequent years of political deadlock had this vitriolic effect on Britain's public conversation, creating a new and bitter divide between 'leavers' and 'remainers' which not only cut across families and friendships, but also had a dislocating effect on the traditional political demarcations of party and class. Politicians, press, and internet echo chambers inflamed the rhetoric of debate and encouraged the effects shown by Sunstein's research. Subsequently, the 2020 survey *Britain's Choice*¹⁸ found that 50% of respondents said that they had never seen Britain so divided, 60% felt exhausted by division in politics, and by a margin of almost five to one, Britons worried that our political divisions would lead to increasing hatred. The perception gained is of a country divided, not only over Brexit, but also over history, Scottish independence, the environment, culture war and much else.

¹⁴ See <https://relationshipsfoundation.org/our-metrics/>

¹⁵ Paraphrased from Stephen M. R. Covey, *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing that Changes Everything*, Simon & Schuster, 2008

¹⁶ Cass Sunstein, "Deliberation Day and Political Extremism", February 02, 2006 https://uchicagolaw.typepad.com/faculty/2006/02/deliberation_da.html

¹⁷ For a recent example, see <https://news.stanford.edu/2021/02/04/deliberative-democracy-depolarize-america/>

¹⁸ Miriam Juan-Torres, Tim Dixon & Arisa Kimaram, "Britain's Choice: Common Ground and Division in 2020s Britain", More in Common 2020, accessed from <https://www.britainschoice.uk/>

Yet, the fascinating takeaway from *Britain's Choice* is that this perceived division is just that – a perception. Instead of a country split in two, what was found instead was that Britons fall into seven different groups¹⁹ that align differently on particular issues, like the shifting images seen through a kaleidoscope. Ultimately, responses show, Britons still have more in common than divides us. This includes pride in the NHS, our volunteer traditions, and our countryside; a desire to become a more tolerant, equal and diverse nation; agreement that power is too concentrated in London and that the inequality gap is too large; and, despite using different language to express their concern, agreement that climate change concerns us all. Some groups talk of a Green New Deal while others talk of conservation and protecting the countryside, suggesting that we can find agreement when we seek to understand our opponents' ideas and motivations, rather than swallowing headlines and buzzwords uncritically. While political events and the media have elevated conflict by focusing on the fault lines in our society, if we can come together with those who are different to us, understand their concerns, build genuine relationships and emphasize our common goal, then we will realise the things we do agree on. This can prevent healthy, democratic differences of opinion from becoming dangerous divisions.

However, doing so will require more than just abstract rhetoric about 'being nice' to one another – it requires genuine, committed, concrete relationships. Relational proximity can only grow within the context of encounter, where the other is known and where the actions of each party can affect the other within some shared context or motivation. This is why it is essential to emphasise a commitment to our mutual identity as citizens and our shared project of working towards the common good, thereby transforming our relationships to one another and to the state.

The Torah and the relational state

The belief that ordinary citizens are capable of partaking in government is a radical one, but has its roots in Protestant Christianity. The earliest thinking on citizenship, traced back to Aristotle's *polis*, limited citizenship and governance to a small elite of wealthy, educated men; the doctrine of the *imago dei*, conversely, provides a foundation for the equality of all humans before God. Similarly, where the political philosophy of Edmund Burke and John Stuart Mill (among others) tended towards an elitism of the powerful or the educated, Christianity subverts this by choosing the 'foolish' and the weak over the wise and the strong.²⁰ Jonathan Chaplin traces the participatory tradition within Protestant theology which asserted that 'each person stands equally responsible before God for the proper discernment of justice and the common good, and so is equally capable of participating, in some manner, in public affairs'.²¹ Others have argued further that if each person could be a vessel for the outpouring of the Spirit, used by God to build up the body of believers, all equal in the eyes of God and qualified to understand and communicate his Word, then they are also qualified 'to participate in church government, and by extension to govern the commonwealth'.²² It could be argued that a biblical anthropology –that all humans are equally made in the image of God and are capable of relationship with Him – provides a stronger basis for democratic participation in government than any appeal to 'natural' or 'human' rights.

¹⁹ More detail on these groups, and the methods used to identify them, can be found at the website above and in the full report.

²⁰ 1 Corinthians 1:27, also see the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12)

²¹ Jonathan Chaplin, "Christian Justifications for Democracy", *Ethics in Brief*, Autumn 2006 (Vol. 11 No. 3)

²² Robert Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 32

Turning to the Torah as the paradigmatic expression of God's wisdom for the collective life of a nation,²³ Nick Spencer identifies six independent sources of authority: the individual, the family, the local community, the Levitical priests, the tribes or regions, and the central government.²⁴ These areas 'overlapped and were non-hierarchical,' each with its own protected spheres of responsibility, but each also giving way to the other sources of authority in appropriate situations. As a result of this multi-layered structure, government 'was not a distant, abstract entity but an immediate and concrete fact of life, based on natural ties of locality, community and family, and intended to give a positive incentive to maintaining productivity, social integration and individual worth'. Land laws encouraged people to stay rooted in a particular community in a multi-generational system of support centred around the family. In today's context, where the status of the family is far from what it was in ancient Israel, the central state has picked up the responsibility of care; instead, the biblical model would give that responsibility to the local community, while seeking to rebuild the value of extended families. This is why I am focusing on community provision, instead of calling for families to take on a role that they are, in many cases, unequipped for. We are not to give up on the role of the family, but work with what is contextually appropriate. Hannah Petra and Guy Brandon identify three layers of welfare provision: the extended family as the core provider; the wider community providing the safety net (mainly for those without the protection of a family – ie widows, orphans and immigrants); and the state as facilitating all of this by maintaining the law.²⁵ OT law, they argue, intended for the state to 'provide a national context within which the other groups could thrive and perform their duties,' not as 'an intrusive, all-controlling state with sole care responsibility, nor did it champion the complete withdrawal of the state: the ideal of the Old Testament is the diffusion of political and economic power.'

These principles can be summed up in two ideas that have emerged in different Christian traditions: subsidiarity – the principle that decisions should be taken at the lowest and most local possible level of authority – and sphere sovereignty, a formulation of society developed by Dutch theologian and Prime Minister Abraham Kuyper, in which different authorities (including the church) have their own independent areas of control in a diffuse and decentralized model. Along with an increasing focus on relationships, these ideas are growing in popularity in the secular policy world. Academics, think tanks and public servants, particularly following the lead of Nobel Prize-winning economist Elinor Ostrom, are calling for an increasing localization of power – not just devolution to more of the same hierarchical local governing authorities, but the genuine empowerment of local people and organizations, both for the benefit it would bring to the delivery of public services and for the strengthening of communities. Ostrom's key insights map onto the biblical model remarkably well: that of the commons, where communities can manage their own resources in a sustainable and productive way without the need for regulation or privatisation; that of self-governance, where democracy is more meaningful at a local level; and that of polycentricity, a dynamic system of diverse and layered institutions of different kinds, open to experimentation, as opposed to a top-down, monolithic and overly centralized system.²⁶

²³ See, for example, David McIlroy, 'The Law of Love', *Cambridge Papers* Vol. 17, no. 2, June 2008
<https://www.jubilee-centre.org/cambridge-papers/the-law-of-love-by-david-mcilroy>

²⁴ <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/apolitical-animal-lessons-biblical-model/>

²⁵ Hannah Petra and Guy Brandon, "A Biblical Perspective on Later Life", Jubilee Centre 2012

²⁶ The think tank New Local has summarised the work of Ostrom here:
<https://www.newlocal.org.uk/publications/ostrom/>

The community paradigm

Such ideas are wrapped up in the think tank New Local's campaign for a shift towards the 'community paradigm'.²⁷ They argue that public services have been trapped in the thinking of two previous paradigms: the state paradigm, where individuals are passive recipients of services 'done to them' by hierarchical, paternalistic and inefficient state institutions; and its counter, the market paradigm, where individuals are 'consumers' or 'customers' in transactional relationships that drive down costs but have a dehumanizing effect on recipients in the pursuit of economic efficiency. This has characterized the debate between the political left and right for decades: the former believes that the state should provide for the needs of citizens, whereas the latter argues for the rolling back of the state to allow for provision by the free market. Both of these paradigms hang over policymaking today, and both are deficient. Public services are already under enormous pressure, having to focus on crisis provision at the last resort rather than on providing dignified, humane help at the preventative stage, and will face greater pressure in the years to come from demographic changes and rising demand.

Instead, as advocated for in Danny Kruger's report, community power looks like 'local people, acting together spontaneously or through enduring institutions, to design and deliver the kind of neighbourhood they want to be a part of'.²⁸ It is based on the belief that people and communities themselves know best what they need and – given the appropriate information, support, power and resources – can lead to better results, transforming citizens from passive recipients or rights-claiming consumers to active participants in the process. It acknowledges the fact that remote, distant actors are unable to fully comprehend the unique circumstances, needs, and strengths of local communities, and thus it should preferably be those who are affected by policy in an area who should be those who are involved in crafting it. A great success story of the community paradigm can be found in East Ayrshire's Vibrant Communities project,²⁹ where members of the community have been genuinely empowered to take a lead on service development and delivery, from events, to healthcare, to maintenance of public land and much more. These developments appear to be congruent with the Old Testament role for the state, described by Guy Brandon as 'to enable each group to carry out its role as effectively as possible – not to intervene directly to do everything for them'.³⁰ The community paradigm rejects the idea that the state must either do everything or nothing, and instead sees the state as a facilitator, working in conjunction with communities and citizens for the common good.

I am labouring the point on how the state is organised because in order for participatory citizenship to be effective or attractive, for people to be convinced of the value of participation, 'they need to be convinced that their engagement is meaningful and given powerful tools to generate the necessary change'.³¹ Therefore, whilst I am calling on citizens to take up their role as active participants in the public square, the essential first step is for states to commit to giving power away. Beyond this shift in mindset for the delivery of public services and the role of the state, I want to suggest two practical steps that governments can take to empower communities and involve their citizens in the joint project of our shared life.

²⁷ Adam Lent and Jessica Studdert, "The Community Paradigm: Why public services need radical change and how it can be achieved", New Local February 2019, accessed from <https://www.newlocal.org.uk/research/community-paradigm/>

²⁸ "Levelling up our communities", p. 13

²⁹ <https://www.east-ayrshire.gov.uk/CouncilAndGovernment/About-the-Council/East%20Ayrshire%20Council%20Structure/Safer-Communities/HousingandCommunities/VibrantCommunities.aspx>

³⁰ Guy Brandon, *Jubilee Roadmap*, p. 25

³¹ "The Community Paradigm", New Local, p. 42

Deliberative democracy

The first comes before the stage of enacting policy and concerns how decisions are made. Deliberative methods are growing in popularity around the world, and their value in designing policy relates to what is termed the ‘knowledge problem’, which states that it is unreasonable to expect politicians and civil servants to fully understand the impact of policies from the perspective of all the stakeholders that they represent. By gathering a representative sample of the population concerned – a ‘mini-public’ – in order to deliberate over a significant length of time, informed by experts and facilitated by moderators, but allowing participants to shape the agenda, share their experiences, and reach their own conclusions, decisions can be reached that are well informed, representative, and owned by citizens. This can help politicians make difficult decisions with legitimacy and confidence, as in the case of Ireland’s citizens’ assembly before the referendum on its controversial Eighth Amendment. The assembly met over five weekends and produced a report that all voters were able to access before voting in the referendum and helped them to understand what the effects of their vote would be. Whatever one thinks of the outcome, the issue had previously left Ireland in a constitutional deadlock that had proved impossible to resolve electorally. However, with the legitimacy given to it by this deliberative process, the repeal of the amendment passed without causing the division it would otherwise have done if initiated by politicians – whichever way they decided.³² It has been suggested that a similar public deliberation before the Brexit referendum would have helped the electorate to have been much better informed on what ‘leave’ or ‘remain’ actually meant, free from the interference of press and politics, and would have avoided the deadlock and political upheaval that ensued for three and a half years, and for two general elections, after the vote.

Beyond their impact on policy and democratic legitimacy, deliberative forums such as assemblies and juries can also be transformative for the participants themselves. The deliberative process takes their views on an issue from initial spontaneous, gut views, informed by their own experiences and the influences around them, to informed views after expert presentations, and finally to considered views, having weighed up the different approaches to a problem together with other citizens. The process gets people thinking outside of their individual self-interest to instead consider the interests of the common good; something that voting typically struggles to achieve. It breaks the parent-child relationship between the state and the individual by giving participants a real sense that they can shape a public process. Furthermore, as noted earlier, it gets people from different walks of life who are demographically and politically diverse to sit down together, listen respectfully to all sides of an issue, consider the weaknesses of their own position and learn to understand the other point of view and experiences, all in the context of face-to-face relationships with fellow citizens, rather than being couched in inaccessible technical language or cloaked in political motives.

Whilst deliberation is needed at the national level, it is at the local level where people have these deepest real-life connections, embedded in a shared local context. In the summer of 2018, two UK government departments (DCMS and MHCLG) commissioned three local authorities to run citizens’ assemblies on a topic of their choosing. The think tank Involve was commissioned to report on the assemblies – not on what particular policy decisions were reached, but on the effects of the

³² Patrick Chalmers, “How 99 strangers in a Dublin hotel broke Ireland’s abortion deadlock”, The Guardian, Thu 8 Mar 2018 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/08/how-99-strangers-in-a-dublin-hotel-broke-irelands-abortion-deadlock?CMP=Share_AndroidApp_Other&fbclid=IwAR0poPhQuex510TYULqi73I51SO0JyJGrZaiG_v2NggE31u1Fg-KtbBqnsC

deliberation itself.³³ In the Cambridge assembly, 72% of participants reported feeling more confident in engaging in political decision making having been involved in the assembly. The process of deliberation also allowed support for typically controversial interventions – such as closing roads – to grow as people were given the opportunity to understand the evidence, hear others’ views, and shape proposals themselves. The Dudley panel reported that participants were ‘engaged throughout,’ and that ‘the opportunity clearly meant a lot to them. They really valued having a say in their own and their families’ futures, that the council is listening to them and that their views are respected.’ In Romsey, the recommendations put forward were ‘received really well’ by both the team tasked to work on their recommendations and by other local residents. One council officer reported that ‘combining representative and participatory democracy not only empowers residents but also councillors, because they are unable to understand the issue in more depth which will help them to make evidence-led policy decisions.’ As the report concludes, deliberative processes ‘have consistently been shown to send participants back out into the world with a newfound understanding of a particular issue, an augmented sense of common purpose and a greater drive for civic endeavour.’³⁴

Of course, there are many challenges to designing a good deliberative process, taking time, effort, and money, involving experts, selecting participants at random within representative sampling, facilitating well so that everyone is heard and discussion is not dominated by the loudest voices, and designing the programme well. The proposals must be fully owned and formulated in the words of the participants and, crucially, it must be clear in advance what action the relevant authority will take on the proposals. I do not advocate for deliberation to replace representative government entirely – elected officials still need to discern what to accept and reject – but, as I have already argued, citizens must be given the dignity of knowing that their input will be valued if they are to enter into the spirit of participation.

Community power

The second step is to empower communities themselves to serve their areas through community power initiatives and community organising. While one-time assemblies and juries can create relationships that go on to have an impact beyond the duration of their deliberations, they are ultimately one-off meetings of strangers randomly drawn together. If we want to see the nation transformed along relational and subsidiary lines, then we must have our focus on long-term, locally-rooted relationships, embedded in institutional semi-permanence and going beyond individuals to include the key actors in civil society – faith groups, businesses, charities, and other mutual associations. Community Organizing (CO) spearheaded by Citizens UK³⁵ does just that, by building relationships between individuals in institutions who agree to work together to achieve change in a particular place. CO encourages participants to focus on areas of agreement and consensus, to identify winnable campaigns and – through the process of showing what can be achieved by ordinary people in community – be inspired to participate further. Unlike deliberation, CO is entirely independent from government so can provide the basis for building a genuine ‘people of power’ that can avoid co-optation and hold traditional power structures to account.

³³ “Innovation in Democracy Programme case studies”, available at <https://www.involve.org.uk/our-work/our-projects/practice/how-can-councils-engage-residents-tackle-local-issues>

³⁴ “How to run a citizens’ assembly: A handbook for local authorities based on the Innovation in Democracy Programme”, p. 7. Accessed from <https://www.involve.org.uk/our-work/our-projects/practice/how-can-councils-engage-residents-tackle-local-issues>

³⁵ <https://www.citizensuk.org/>

Such independence is certainly needed, but it does not rule out the possibility of communities, given significant freedom and resources, working in partnership with commissioning bodies once they have shown their potential for positive change. A notable example of citizens participating in community initiatives having been given such resources and power to decide is the Big Local project,³⁶ in which the 150 poorest communities in England were each given £1m from the National Lottery Community Fund on the condition that the communities themselves decide how to spend the money, with a long-term horizon of 10-15 years for their chosen projects. These groups have worked on community regeneration – ‘levelling up’ – in a range of ways, from tackling homelessness, to building affordable renewable energy systems, to street art and much more, which has given these communities a sense of pride in the place in which they live. By drawing together members of a community that may otherwise be disparate, fighting their own battles and isolated from relationship with one another to work together for the good of their communities, CO is one of the most powerful tools available for uniting people across differences and demonstrating the effective agency of ordinary people.

The church and civil society

Churches can be particularly effective in this context. Which other organisation is so deeply embedded in local communities whilst also having a global infrastructure that engenders solidarity between people across the world? Which other civil society organisation sees people of all demographics and political opinions come together once a week around a common purpose and call one another ‘family’? Whilst the Church does not do this perfectly, it is better placed than any other organisation to model to the world how to disagree well and how to build relationships across differences in pursuit of a common goal. Many churches have been rooted in their communities for decades or centuries as ‘intentional communities which appeal to motivations beyond individual profit or short-term popularity’ that allow for a long view and do not withdraw when things get difficult.³⁷ Churches can also provide positive externalities that the state simply cannot, such as joy, hope, and community in local, personal and relational ways. Church buildings can be essential hubs for communities and necessary spaces for public meeting that balance rival interests – perhaps forums for uber-local deliberation, as in the case of election hustings.

Of course, historically speaking, in many countries the Church essentially *was* civil society before the construction of the welfare state and the growth of secular associations. Unfortunately, many churches now see serving in their communities as a kind of ‘foreign affair’, rather than part of their essential home ministry. There has, however, been a fantastic response from many UK churches to the urgency of the coronavirus crisis, with over 5 million meals a month being delivered to those in need, churches working more closely with local authorities and other local players, and obviously continuing to meet spiritual and emotional needs through their regular services.³⁸ While this time of crisis continues, so too does this time of opportunity, not only to show the love of Jesus to our communities in practical ways, but to play a key part in the reshaping of the social contract around communities and civil society as advocated for in the Kruger Report.

The actions of the local church are the concrete ways that the Gospel meets a world in need, of theology put into practice in human relationships. If the Church wishes to point people to that Gospel in this moment, it must partake in this regeneration of communities and not sit on the side-lines as an

³⁶ <https://localtrust.org.uk/big-local/about-big-local/>

³⁷ Rowan Williams speaking in a House of Lords debate on the role of churches in the civic life of towns and cities, Hansard, 19 May 2006, Col. 501 & 503

³⁸ Russell Rook, “A new deal for faith communities post-Covid-19”, 1 Jan 2021, <https://www.jubilee-centre.org/blog/a-new-deal-for-faith-communities-post-covid-19>

irrelevant and anachronistic symbol of an age in which Christianity ruled civil society. As we have already seen, the mandate to pursue a community-centred, relational society is clear in Scripture. To do so, we must be willing to enter productive working relationships with those of other faiths and those of none. The churches that acted most effectively in the early stages of the pandemic were those that had already-existing relationships of trust with local authorities and other actors; churches should not be afraid of reaching out to build a web with local actors who know their areas best and are able to act as key facilitators and connectors in the social tissue of the community.

Such action is central to Christian theology. The very nature of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is to exist in a relationship of love;³⁹ before the creation of the world, God was love. As beings made in the image of God,⁴⁰ we too are made for loving relationships with one another – indeed, the first ‘not good’ of the creation account was that the man was alone, without the companionship of an other.⁴¹ To know God is to love, and we are to show the evidence of our relationship with God through our love for one another.⁴² The doctrine of the incarnation, of the God who ‘became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood’,⁴³ who made his dwelling among us, born into poverty and suffering, trading his divine glory to take on the nature of a servant and to be humbled to death on a cross,⁴⁴ leaves us no choice but to also be apparent in our neighbourhoods, to give ourselves in love to others, and to serve those around us. We are not given the option of blissful isolation from the world. Finally, the outward focus of the Gospel prevents Christians from holding on to what we have, but compels us to carry that hope into the world around us, shining the light of Christ into the darkest places.

The citizens’ commission

Finally, as individuals, we should seek out opportunities to be faithful citizens in our local and national contexts, to see those around us as partners in the mission of seeking the common good and to involve ourselves in the civic life of our communities. It will take leaders at the top of society to move systems in a relational direction, and civil society institutions are vital to anchoring long-term relationships in place, but we all need to choose to put on the identity of a ‘citizen’; to see ourselves as tied to the wellbeing of others – seeking to build relationships rooted in locality – and to understand that we have obligations to participate in public life and not simply receive from the state as passive consumers. This is essential for capitalizing on the outpouring of community spirit and volunteer effort that we have seen in the Covid-19 crisis. Loving one’s neighbour well cannot be something that only happens in times of emergency, and in order to love our neighbours in a political community, this shared identity of ‘citizen’ is what can bring us together, despite all that seems to divide us. We can either lean into exclusive, ‘us-versus-them’ dynamics, causing further distrust and hatred within our society, or we can focus on building our common ground and devising creative solutions for today’s challenges that acknowledge the interests of all.

³⁹ 1 John 4:7-21

⁴⁰ Genesis 1:26

⁴¹ Genesis 2:18

⁴² John 13:35

⁴³ John 1:14, MSG

⁴⁴ Philippians 2:6-11

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