

Our cathedrals can pull Britain out of depression

Two writers unveil a plan to help the country overcome economic crisis



Pedestrians walk past a job centre in Soho, central London (AP)

Since the banking crash and in the face of the restructuring of our national debt many from the churches have had a lot to say about the future of capitalism and the morality of our economy. At St Paul's Cathedral the "Occupy" demonstrators made a good deal of noise. Archbishop Vincent Nichols launched an important initiative to encourage business leaders to discuss the ethics of their firms and the Anglican Church will be using its shareholdings in banks to block excessive bonuses.

In the face of massive popular support a few charities opposed the cap on welfare benefits without raising the complex but related issue of poor and low pay. But as one of us arrived newly appointed to the House of Lords, while the other of us returned to the grassroots following a major family illness, something truly fresh still seemed to be lacking. As the balance between government, business and society changes, how might the common good be built in these new times when good jobs really are a key to security? With the launch of the Cathedral Innovation Centre and movement next week we are convinced part of a serious response has begun to emerge.

Economic growth and inclusion occur when new firms are founded and growing firms take on new staff. For example, Premier Travel Inn has continued to grow throughout the recession. Social justice rises when passionate people invent new ways to address pressing social needs. Just look at the work of Cafod. And a serious hope for sustaining equality of opportunity endures when both economic and social innovation combine to make scarce resources go further. In the economic sphere we might think of the internet, Dyson or the John Lewis Partnership model. In the social sphere, Traidcraft, open-heart surgery or microfinance might spring to mind. With the rise of China's low-wage manufacturing industries and the end of the mass-produced, factory-like welfare state something new is needed in our country now.

The Anglican cathedral in Portsmouth had some buildings that it was not using. They were approached and asked if they might let them to a new social enterprise and charity at a peppercorn rent. The dean and chapter agreed and so work began to prepare the space. The Royal Society of Arts were approached and soon the call went out to congregations across the south and to the Society's Fellows asking for help. A vision emerged to unlock the potential of under-used properties, and the time, talents and treasure of church-goers and other people of goodwill, and so create spaces where innovative new responses to economic and social needs could be moved forward.

When the Cathedral Innovation Centre opens next week it will have cost £9,000 to get off the ground. The nearest public sector equivalent is costing £2 million. The centre will be a place where those wanting to launch a firm or address need can move in and receive a bespoke package of support. This will be tailor-made and comprise free to cheap office space, pro bono mentors, seed funding and help with contacts, marketing and finance. One new member wants to launch a charity to help children with real problems with their maths and literacy by harnessing the time of retired school teachers. Another is building a video games company, while another still has plans when it comes to health technology.

New apprenticeships for those who will not get to university will be created, too, along with leadership development opportunities at the highest level. With 14 desks the centre is small, but it will soon become the hub of something bigger. The Catholic Diocese of Portsmouth is now a formal partner in the centre's development and this new social enterprise will open a second centre in central Southampton, thanks to the enthusiastic support of Mgr Vincent Harvey, the area dean, and Pat Feighery, a well-known local businessman. Already there have been approaches from Derby and Cheshire, East Anglia and the north east as other churches, mosques and temples look at their halls and space and say: "We want some help to do that too."

It is our contention that every deanery or circuit, and certainly every cathedral, has the capacity and networks to create an innovation centre with between four and 20 desks, and the mentors and resources to make them seedbeds of renewal. That is why the centre is not just about a single place but the front

end of a national social enterprise, charity and movement where the Church, in partnership with all those of goodwill, finds a new way to serve concretely, practically and innovatively.

Using British cooperative law we are even inviting Christians and others nationwide to become members of the centre by investing £75 or more in community shares in the venture. The civic dividend from such sums will be enormous. Thanks to a Treasury scheme we are hopeful that income taxpayers who back the work will gain 50 per cent relief on their support.

The basic aim, of course, is to help new firms create jobs and to enhance a fresh sense of civic duty and energy. The goal is also to develop apprenticeships that make people employable and to develop fresh models so that the new Traidcrafts, Body Shops, Cafods, John Lewis Partnerships and other ventures and causes for our times can emerge. But we also want to provoke a conversation about the future: what shape will the new civic settlement take? How will the businesses of the future take responsibility? But, especially, how does one have such conversations so that they have impact rather than just producing press releases, conference bookings and worthy papers. In tough times ideas must lead to new institutions which make the economic and social difference.

From the Houses of Parliament to at the grassroots, we want to make life after the economic crisis more human, more dynamic and more sustainable. The Cathedral Innovation Centre is a new spark in the dark and we hope that others will join with us to build more of that same light.

Baroness Berridge of the the Vale of Catmose is chairwoman of the All-Party Group on Religious Freedom and one of the youngest members of the House of Lords. Francis Davis is a former Portsmouth diocesan trustee and a founder of the Cathedral Innovation Centre and movement. To express your support for the centre's national development go to Cathedralinnovationcentre.com or email francis.davis@thesparkinthedark.org

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