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Gospel plausibility and Community Organising:
A missionary endeavour

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Abstract

How does Christianity make sense to those on the margins of the church and to those within? How can those of us who proclaim the Gospel week by week explicate it in such a way that it is not only comprehensible, but plausible to the inquirer? This article introduces Community Organising (CO) as but one way forward for a church that is now suffering an existential crisis in a culture that has become largely indifferent to its claims. It will argue that the gospel becomes more plausible when encountered within the context of community engagement. It does so by laying out a description of CO, providing a theological rationale, and sharing the results of interviews conducted with those practising CO in their communities.

What makes Christian faith plausible?

In the contemporary environment of a largely secular culture, with church membership and participation in freefall, constructive ways forward are increasingly difficult to discern. To compound the challenge, many within the church itself struggle with conflicting beliefs and wonder why neighbours and family members are indifferent to the claims of the Gospel. This is a paper that frames our current predicament and highlights an

avenue of missionary engagement both with those who wonder about the Christian faith and with the faithful who may be quietly wondering about the plausibility of their own beliefs. MacLaren helpfully illustrates the present circumstance by describing the need for what he calls 'plausibility shelters,' or social contexts in which the claims of the faith make practical sense through preaching, teaching and communities of socialisation amongst like-minded believers. Unlike the plausibility 'structures' referenced by Berger et al.,[1] MacLaren suggests that in today's pluralised culture the church can only expect to create 'shelters' amidst a cacophony of competing narrative voices. The need for such shelters arises from the internal conflict many Christians struggle with: '[…] Christians find mission implausible. The attempt to share their faith with their peers replicates a conflict which they already experience internally.'[2] Christians find mission, evangelism and even worship of a transcendent God difficult in a world that no longer places any sense of value or meaning on the claims of Scripture or the teaching of the church. For church members and clergy alike, it involves the 'forced adoption of a split personality; it is a tacit invitation to self-deception – to maintain in private a set of beliefs as if they were objectively true, while at the same time living a "public" life that requires the suppression or denial of these beliefs.'[3]

Fraser takes up MacLaren's argument about the implausibility of mission and suggests that '[…] in order to be plausible or believable, Christianity requires daily face-to-face social interactions to confirm the importance of the Church and the self-evident nature of its beliefs.'[4] The plausibility structures of times past have fallen away and the prerogative to address matters of 'Education, social security, healthcare and punishment of low-level crime […] have been stripped from [the church], and are now the responsibility of the state.'[5] Largely for financial reasons, the result of infighting and splits, the church gradually withdrew from the public square, choosing instead to focus its energies on matters

[1] Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).

[2] Duncan MacLaren, *Mission Implausible: Restoring Credibility to the Church* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), 26.

[3] MacLaren, 23.

[4] Liam Jerrold Fraser, *Mission in Contemporary Scotland* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2021), 61–62.

[5] Fraser, 62.

spiritual over the mundane, and effectively reducing its influence on the surrounding culture. In consequence the claims of the pulpit became remote and insensible. Fraser argues, 'In this, we see a key lesson for mission in contemporary Scotland: *spiritual plausibility is related to social significance*. If the Church meets real social needs, or features in day-to-day social interactions, then its significance and plausibility will be higher. If it does not, the Church will struggle to make the Gospel heard.'[6]

In other words, there is an inherent and necessary link between spiritual plausibility and social engagement. Text needs context, but how might the two work together? Here is where Community Organising may offer a way forward.

What is Community Organising?

While outwith the traditional lexicon of church mission, there is much to commend this form of community engagement and it is not difficult to justify theologically. First though, a definition of terms. Ivereigh describes Community Organising (CO) and Catholic Social Teaching (CST) in this way: 'Community Organising is a method by which ordinary people engage with politics through their institutions—churches, neighbourhood associations, unions—which form an alliance in order to promote the common good.'[7] While CO is not necessarily connected to or dependent on church involvement, as one of the primary local institutions creating 'social capital'[8] and inherently concerned for the welfare of their neighbours, churches have historically played a prominent role in CO. In 1930s America, Saul Alinsky 'sought to connect representatives of the nascent meat-packer's trades union together with faith groups and community projects in the neighbourhood.'[9] These groups seemed odd bedfellows at first, but they quickly realised a shared desire for the welfare of the trade unions. Their mission was driven by self-interest, when individuals understood that the betterment of *self* was dependent upon the

[6] Fraser, 27.

[7] Austen Ivereigh, *Faithful Citizens: A Practical Guide to Catholic Social Teaching and Community Organising* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2010), 32.

[8] Ann Morisy, *Journeying Out: A New Approach to Christian Mission* (London: Continuum, 2004), 45–65.

[9] Chris Shannahan, *A Theology of Community Organizing: Power to the People* (London: Routledge, 2014), 12.

betterment of *all*. Their movement, latterly known as the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council, became like a tide that raised all boats and served as a model for subsequent organising efforts. While it began as a single-focus collective, it later served to address multiple, interconnected social issues.

Shannahan illustrates a number of CO principles that are helpful.[10] CO is neither short term nor single-issue based. It is not advocacy based, but rather seeks to encourage local people to speak for themselves. It is not a social nor a protest movement but rather seeks to create permanent networks of action. CO is not a welfare service agency. A primary tool of CO is the creation of tension as a tool for social changes, pitting those *with* socio/political capital against those *with none* or very little.

CO places human well-being and flourishing at the heart of the endeavour by addressing socio-economic systems that create and perpetuate poverty and inequality. CO has multiple foci and involves the establishment of lasting administrative groups that ensure community well-being remains a priority over time. Issues that might be addressed may include single issues like filling potholes or more complex issues like advocating for the redevelopment of area social housing. But it also addresses the underlying systemic problems that leave some neighbourhoods deprived of adequate street repair or suitable housing. Each community will have different issues to contend with, but CO begins with listening to residents with a view to discerning *what is important locally* and then moving on to coopting the extant resources within those communities for the shared goal of effecting meaningful change.

There is a strong element of engagement with democratic process in CO as the formerly disenfranchised find a way to confront the political powers and advocate for their own well-being. CO often involves political confrontation and active protest against policy and practice that leads to and even depends upon mass exploitation. Democracy is rooted in opportunities for equal participation in democratic process and by bringing people together around common concerns. CO establishes a voice for the voiceless and a prerogative for the poor.

Disparity and difference become a strength in CO rather than a hindrance as relationships are built over former cultural divides. Gathered around local issues and a common desire for the betterment of one's

[10] Shannahan, 14.

community, former differences quickly become insignificant. It is not utopic, but by bringing disparate people together around common concerns, there is abundant opportunity for the development of life-changing relationships and real and positive changes in communities.

It is not, however, charity. A cardinal rule of CO is 'Never do for others what they can do for themselves'.[11] This is an important distinction for churches, especially those churches comprised of members for whom extant social structures have created advantages over their neighbours. There is an inclination and a mentality amongst many churches to 'share their gifts' with the 'less fortunate'. While much has been done and is being done to alleviate poverty and resultant suffering, CO intentionally avoids such measures, believing instead that the necessary resources for change already exist within the community itself. The danger of charity is the hidden presumption that material abundance indicates a corresponding spiritual abundance, leading to the sense that one is somehow 'bringing Christ' to the disadvantaged and the dissolute. Charitable efforts become a means of evangelism with the end of 'growing the church' by making converts of grateful recipients. This attitude and presumption defeat the purpose of CO and can instead aggravate existing social divisions and create dependency amongst the 'recipients of grace' and paternalism amongst the 'benefactors'.[12] The church may go away 'feeling good' about itself but remain unaware that it has done little if anything to address the genuine issues within the community. They may in fact have only served to perpetuate a social system within which they unfairly benefit.

This is what makes CO so challenging for wealthier Christians. Well-intentioned churches may, for example, open a food bank and provide a momentary respite for those who struggle with hunger, all the while failing to ask the question, 'Why are so many hungry?' Or 'Why do I have so much and they so little?' Or 'What socioeconomic systems are subtly at work that perpetuate poverty instead of alleviating it?' And, most importantly 'How am I an unwitting participant in and beneficiary of this system?' The wealthy and middle class have little incentive to shake the foundations of

[11] Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 76.

[12] See Bretherton, 76 for further elucidation of this important CO principle, drawn from the work of Saul D. Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 175.

the very system that creates and sustains their privilege. The tendency is instead to ignore or be entirely unaware of the greater matters of systemic oppression, hence the need to listen first instead of presuming knowledge of 'problems' that need 'solutions'.[13]

CO and the Gospel

It is not difficult to provide theological justification for CO, and much of the foundation for church involvement in CO is derived from liberation theology with its conviction that 'God is on the side of the poor and oppressed and encourages the Church to participate in creating a new reign of life in which all people live with justice and love.'[14] Justice and advocacy are driving motivations for community organisers, though with the caveat that efforts build resilience and resourcefulness from within the community. CO is *being with* people and encouraging relationships across bounds for the sake of social betterment. Wells has written extensively on the promise of God's being with God's creation and its people. He argues that too often the church has embraced a 'salvationist' ecclesiology offering a solution to mortality, rather than a 'being with' ecclesiology that meliorates the deeper problem of isolation.[15] CO centres on relationship as a primary objective in order to raise a communal voice for political engagement. It is a short step from that aim to the prophetic task of confronting the 'powers that be' with the demand for justice for the oppressed. Similarly, as stated above, CST commends CO as a means of strengthening democratic process towards the 'common good'. This important theological principle rests on our common creation in the image of God and the inherent worth of every individual within the interrelations of human community. One cannot experience the common good in isolation. Self-interest, as distinct from selfishness, is rooted in love for one's neighbour and the desire to

[13] Barrett and Harley illustrate the need to recognise and understand social privilege in a way that, for a white, middle-class, male, heterosexual, cis-gender Christian makes for uncomfortable reading, see Al Barrett and Ruth Harley, *Being Interrupted: Reimagining the Church's Mission from the Outside, In* (London: SCM Press, 2020), 37–53.

[14] Chris Howson, *A Just Church: 21st Century Liberation Theology in Action* (London: Continuum, 2011), 2.

[15] Samuel Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 10–19.

seek his/her welfare alongside your own. Democracy and the common good are not synonymous, but the former enables the latter. That is, democracy provides a vehicle for establishing the common good.

Beneath these concepts is a renewed theology of kingdom. Historically, the church has placed a heavy emphasis on the problem of sin and the promise of forgiveness and a future life in heaven, away from the created reality we presently experience. Salvation means an escape from the corruption of this earth to a place of bliss in heaven. But Jesus did not confront the powers of his day for the sole benefit of ensuring eternal life for his followers. He did so with a radical view of establishing the kingdom of God right now, in the present. The contrast could not be greater. If the kingdom of God is for the hereafter alone, there is little incentive to bring kingdom principles to bear on current social problems. Escape would be a primary concern. Whereas if the kingdom is here and now, as Wright and others argue,[16] there is prime motivation for the church to work with those who are already 'labouring in the vineyard' alongside their neighbours.

The Good Samaritan overturned

Approaching CO from a theological perspective necessitates thinking about poverty and deprivation through a different lens, one in which the viewer recognises him/herself as the one in need. It also means recognising that material wealth does not equate with spiritual wealth and repenting of such presumption. Material wealth may in fact be a stumbling block to genuine discipleship. A simple exercise reveals hidden presumptions.[17] Ask any middle-class congregation to reflect on the story of the Good Samaritan. What is this story about and what is it asking us to do as disciples? The obvious answer is that we are to 'go and do likewise' and

[16] See N. T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2012); N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2016); John Zizioulas, *The One and the Many: Studies on God, Man, the Church, and the World Today*, ed. Gregory Edwards (Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2010); John Zizioulas, *The Eucharistic Communion and the World* (London: T&T Clark, 2011).

[17] See Robert W. Funk, "The Good Samaritan as Metaphor", *Semeia* 2 (1974): 74–81; also, Raymond Fung, *The Isaiah Vision: An Ecumenical Strategy for Congregational Evangelism* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1992).

provide for those whom we imagine are 'in need'. But this assumes that the reader shares his/her identity in the story with the Samaritan. Naturally, the one who shares his/her 'wealth' with the 'poor' is the one who is blessed. But read the same story amongst a materially poor congregation and the results are different. The 'poor' are far more likely to identify themselves with the one who is beaten and robbed than with the one providing aid and succour. Some will even be able to share stories of their own experience of robbery and beatings, both figurative and literal. The experience of poverty and material deprivation creates a narrative of suffering and consequent sympathy for those who share a similar plight. It is hard to identify with the largesse of the Samaritan when you have none yourself.

Dig deeper in the story and it becomes even more difficult for wealthy Christians to presume affinity with the Samaritan. The Samaritans were a despised people in ancient Judaism, forever marginalised within Jewish culture, and this was the genius of Jesus' storytelling. By making the Samaritan the central figure of his parable, he made it impossible for the dominant class to see themselves in the same role. His early listeners would have been outraged that the Samaritan was the hero of the story, and so must we. The last person with whom a privileged individual is likely to identify with is the man in need, but it is within this role that one may, for the first time, begin to recognise his/her own spiritual poverty, especially when the aid and succour comes from the one who had only recently been perceived as the one in greater need. As Wells writes, 'But this is our moment of conversion. For this is the form Jesus chooses to take when he comes to save us.'[18] In other words, it is often within the context of the church's determined effort to 'help the needy' that it recognises its own need for help and inherent spiritual poverty. Like the parable, the help often comes from the least likely 'helpers'. For the church, this upturned reading is essential in avoiding paternalism and establishing genuine relationship amongst those whose communities we might participate in organising. It is a humbling and arguably *necessary* pathway towards genuine discipleship.[19]

[18] Wells, 95.

[19] Ann Morisy, *Beyond the Good Samaritan: Community Ministry and Mission* (London: Continuum, 2003), 13–26.

CO in practice

In what remains of this paper I want to have a look at the witness of three effective Scottish practitioners of CO. While they describe their work in different terms, it is not difficult to see the same themes and emphases at work. Nick Bowry is Rector of St James Church in Penicuik; Derek Pope is minister of Motherwell North Parish Church, where he and his wife Helen developed the New Connections project; Martin Johnstone heads 'At the Edge' and instigated the Poverty Truth Commission, among other projects aiming to address poverty and injustice. Bowry and Pope describe their work as Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), while the Poverty Truth Commission more closely resembles the CO model described above. The vision of community well-being and welfare is shared amongst them and described in terms as a *doing with* rather than *doing for*. These are not charities, but efforts at community empowerment and betterment. While the Gospel is preached on Sundays, *it is lived* day-to-day through the week. Most importantly, it is lived *together*, making the claims of faith plausible to those for whom the church is a distant witness. Each ministry began with listening to the voices of the community.

Bowry focused on both the congregation and the community asking open-ended questions: 'What do you like about living here? What would make it better? What can you do on your street? What are you good at?' Taking a lead from Community Organiser Cormac Russell,[20] he looked for willing 'heads, hearts and hands'. The challenge often lies in overcoming social conditioning. 'People tell you you're on the rubbish heap. Culturally we're not comfortable talking about what we're good at. You want to lop off the tall poppy.' Additionally challenging is the long association of welfare provision offered by the local Council and the belief that 'the Council will take care of things, but they don't.'

The Popes spoke in similar terms arguing that many 'deprived' communities had been described in such terms for so long that even those living there could no longer imagine they had anything to give, and yet, living and working on a housing scheme, as the Popes have done now for 28

[20] Cormac Russell and John McKnight, *The Connected Community: Discovering the Health, Wealth, and Power of Neighborhoods* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2022).

years, they both affirmed that 'These are among the most generous people you'll ever meet.' Speaking of impoverished communities, Derek argued, 'We live in a divided Scotland. Some folks are getting on just fine, but there are many who are still living with poverty, which impacts so many things: health and well-being, education, length of life, fulness of life generally.'

In spite of these real challenges both agreed that there was an abundance to life within the community, a strong sense of relationship and a willingness to help one another and, surprisingly, community pride. 'We find these are hugely gifted people who support one another as a way of being, as friends and neighbours. They regard these places as good places to live. They're not trying to get out of them. They're not well spoken about by people living outside these communities, but generally, if you're living here, you're thinking it's a good place to live.'

For the Popes, the Gospel must be a lived experience, connecting with people in their lives day-to-day, a theological perspective very different from their salvationist upbringing. 'I guess, we believe that at a simple level we're talking about God coming among us in a new way. […] It's not about how to get people to heaven, but how can we possibly get people to experience heaven, the good things of God here on earth, so it is a flip of evangelical theology.' Following on from the assumption of bringing 'the answers' to the community, is the presumption that incomers are somehow 'bringing Jesus' as well, something the Popes find patently false. Instead, they argue, 'We believe God is already here, we're to join in His work. The people in these communities are already demonstrating the things of God in their lives.' Helen commented on the work of Ann Morisy and described their work as 'venturesome love' that led to 'cascades of grace',[21] an experience validated time and again.

When asked about how their efforts in the community had affected life in the worshipping congregation, both Bowry and the Popes found the question misleading, as if church had only one definition. Bowry said, 'If we've enabled someone to live a better quality of life, however that person wants to measure it, then surely that's part of the kingdom. […] Those are the glimpses of the kingdom of God among us.' The Popes answered similarly, suggesting that 'church' was too narrowly defined as only what

[21] Morisy, *Journeying Out*, 32, 37.

takes place on Sunday mornings. 'What is the gospel and what is the church? If we look at all the people out there as the people of God, then we don't make a distinction between those who come to church on a Sunday and those who don't. We're regarding everyone as being the people of God. When we think of people in that light, it's a good starting point.'

While neither Bowry nor the Popes are involved in CO per se, their missionary emphases are very similar. CO is distinguished from ABCD in that it intends to enable community empowerment and often confrontation with extant political authorities. While ABCD encourages community organisation, it is less intentional about doing so. These elements were more evident with Martin Johnstone and the Poverty Truth Commission (PTC). Once again, the effort began with conversation, though of a different, more intentional sort. The commission began with gathering policymakers and Council leaders together alongside individuals in the community who were genuinely struggling with poverty.

The PTC came from that sense of what it would look like to put these two groups of people in a room together and *keep them* in a room together long enough so that they stopped talking over one another or imagining that they heard one another, but actually began to develop relationships and friendships and understanding between one another.

Alongside Johnstone was a friend from the PTC, Mrs Sadie Prior, who participated in the early conversations sharing her own experience of poverty. She spoke about the real challenges placed on grandparents and extended family members pressed into caring for the children of relatives, often their own children, who were struggling with addiction. The Kinship Carers of Glasgow first had the opportunity to share their plight through the PTC. 'Martin got us into a place where we would sit and talk and listen […] and then doors started opening. At that time, we were really struggling with poverty. […] I'd never spoken out before: the Kinship Carers were angry, but the PTC took us to a place where we could sit, put our points across, then listen to the answers.'

Through ongoing conversations together over many months, it became clear that Kinship Carers were 'saving the government an absolute fortune' by caring for children that would have otherwise been sent into foster care. Policy changes eventually resulted in the Kinship Carers being recognised, for the first time, in the same category as foster carers, for whom there is far more support in terms of government benefits. 'Many of the Kinship

Carers were not arguing for parity with foster carers or adoption. They didn't want it to become a job or an opportunity: they wanted to love and look after their grandchild in a way that gave their grandchild the best chance in life. […] Give us enough resources to help these children flourish and thrive.' Johnstone commented,

> If you take a child born of addicts, you take a child with huge needs for therapeutic and psychiatric health care that was just never available to Kinship Carers. What a ridiculous injustice because if you were in foster care, you would have access to extensive support. In the Kinship Carers, it was left to Gran to deal with the mess of having heroin in your body from conception. […] It was those things that Kinship Carers were passionate about, the real desire to get parity across Scotland.

Subsequent policy changes resulted in the provision of a weekly stipend offered directly to Kinship Care families, enabling them to provide for the complex needs of a child born to addiction. While not a lavish sum, the monies were welcomed by the Kinship Carers, many of whom had been forced to leave employment to care for their grandchildren.

This is but one example of the work done by the PTC, which remains active in Glasgow, where it began, but has now spread throughout the UK. Johnstone oversees 30–35 different commissions across Britain that are doing the hard work of bringing people together, over time, for the hard work of listening to one another. 'I hope those commissions help civic leaders to actually get deeper into the issues, so we recognize the structural injustices rather than just the surface injustice.'

Like the Popes and Bowry, Johnstone points to a theological model of God *with us* and *among us*, with a particular focus on the vulnerable. Johnstone's sentiment provides a concise summary of liberation teaching:

> Jesus turns up in the poorest and most marginalised in our societies in a way that he doesn't turn up in many others. And actually, choosing to throw our lot in alongside and be led by those who are struggling against poverty is actually choosing to throw our lot in alongside and be led by Jesus. That's what the church needs to get. It needs to stop thinking it takes Jesus to people and start

recognising that it receives Jesus from people. And at that point things change dramatically.

Does CO make the Gospel more plausible?

At the beginning of this paper, I asked the question about the challenge of making the Gospel more plausible to an unbelieving and largely indifferent culture, and if Community Organising and development might aid in that process. The answer is an obvious 'yes', but in ways surprising to those involved. Some participants outwith the church do find church-led engagements with their communities inspiring and some begin to re-examine their faith and make steps towards a renewed commitment to belief. The real surprise is the transformation that takes place amongst church members, many of whom recognise for the first time their own spiritual poverty and the wealth of sharing, caring and faith they find amongst their most vulnerable neighbours. Discipleship, instead of revolving around Bible studies and worship, transpires in community across social divides once taken for granted as normative and insoluble. Making connections and developing genuine relationships across those divides becomes a touchstone for recognising the face of Jesus in the faces of their partners in ministry, leading to a renewed interest in worship and the traditional forms of 'doing church'. It is not church that inspires mission: it is mission that inspires church. While there is evidence to suggest that community engagement leads to church growth,[22] CO establishes the groundwork for a far more meaningful and lasting witness to the plausibility of belief in the secular culture of modern Britain. *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*.

[22] Hannah Rich, "What Helps Churches Grow?" in *Growing Good: Growth, Social Action and Discipleship in the Church of England* (London: Theos/Church Urban Fund, 2020), 56–142.