

Visible Discipleship

This report offers a contemporary understanding of the church's engagement with social responsibility as 'visible discipleship.' Visible discipleship encourages Christians in their growth in faith. Moreover, visible disciples, from across the theological spectrum, act as a positive witness to the world, testifying to the reality of the church's significant contribution to the Common Good. As such visible discipleship provides a healthy corrective to an institutional tendency to place greater missional value on internal affairs than on interactions with the wider community. Social responsibility frames visible discipleship across the five Anglican marks of mission. This ensures a comprehensive approach to mission, reimagined in its contemporary context.

"No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven"

(Matthew 5:15-16, NRSV)

Social Responsibility as Mission

In their exploration of "how social responsibility impacts the mission of the church" SRN members and conference speakers identified five interrelated themes which, taken together, illustrate the ways in which social responsibility impacts the mission of the church:

"Social responsibility simply 'IS' the mission of the church"

- Social responsibility is at the heart of the gospel, building up the Kingdom of God.
- Through social action, the church becomes relationally engaged with the wider community, establishing credibility and discovering the presence of God within his world.
- Social responsibility is at the core of discipleship, as people live out their faith and reflect upon that experience.
- Social responsibility is an intrinsic part of healthy church growth, seeking transformation at every level.
- The challenge of social responsibility is as relevant to the church itself, as it is to the society of which the church is a part.

"Facts inform, stories transform."

Transformation

The national church's legitimacy to shape, and contribute to, a new understanding of the Common Good is dependent upon our grass-roots parochial experience. Diocesan social responsibility (SR) officers have a vital role in connecting the national with the local, ensuring that each informs, energises and challenges the other, and so resourcing the church for the challenges ahead. They go beyond sporadic engagement to develop and sustain relationships between episcopal and parochial leadership.

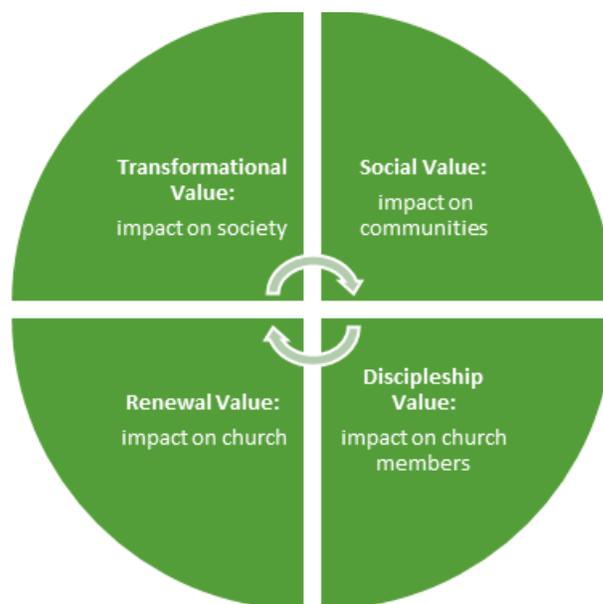
If the role of social responsibility is to be re-imagined for the future, there are three tasks to which the church must devote attention. These are Research & Analysis, Discipleship and the Common Good.

Research and Analysis

There is an urgent need for more comprehensive evidence regarding both the scale and impact of church-initiated social action and wider visible discipleship. In the past, research has been hindered by practitioners' reluctance to gather data on the missional impact of social action. Assessment required by external funders relied on secular measures. Social action was presented as obedience to the gospel imperative that we love our neighbour as ourselves, rather than as a tool for church growth. Jesus' injunction not to flaunt our good deeds led to their concealment. However, it is vital for the church to understand the scale of social action and to compare and contrast the effectiveness of the various forms it can take. Most social action undertaken by the church is reliant upon congregational resources. Good analysis allows church members to make informed decisions as to how they give of their time and talents. Robust research leads to educated choices, revised in the light of on-going monitoring and evaluation.

SRN is committed to support the thorough assessment of the impact of social responsibility, and suggests four parameters (see figure). SRN offers those undertaking such research access to contemporary practice for both qualitative and quantitative studies.

Four Parameters of Social Responsibility



Discipleship

Christians refer to their actions to illustrate their faith. Often, they struggle to articulate the connection. Contemporary research is exploring the symbiotic relationship between social action and discipleship, helping Christians express the relationship between their beliefs and their behaviour. In a similar manner, SR officers need to explain how the grass-roots social engagement of local churches interacts with the diocesan vision. The Church of England's Renewal and Reform agenda needs to recognise the Christian distinctiveness embedded within the church's involvement in social responsibility. This should then be an integral part of strategic developments on Lay Leadership and Discipleship.

Common Good

Now is the time for a more rigorous exploration of the Common Good. The concept of the Common Good had stood against the post-Enlightenment materialistic assumptions of individualistic democracy. The political consensus, which held that promoting self-interest would bring benefits for all, has now been shattered. The existing structures sought to assert 'business as usual' after the 2008 financial crisis. In 2016, people on both sides of the Atlantic rejected that stance, choosing the only alternative presented to them. Alongside that alternative, social fragmentation and the alienation of others are able to thrive. It is for the national church, along with others, to reassert the Common Good as the essential socio-political paradigm. To give lasting hope, the church needs to think afresh about what the Common Good means in its contemporary context. Yet as the national church, we have been identified with the very consensus which has been rejected. It is through our grass-roots parochial experience that the national church can claim its legitimacy to help shape the development and practice of Common Good. And diocesan social responsibility departments have a vital role in connecting the national with the local, ensuring that each informs, energises, and challenges the other.

This calls for a radical re-evaluation of what is 'common' and what is 'good'. This will explore an all-embracing commitment to the whole community and a concern for the well-being of those who are vulnerable. It will recognise the Spirit of God present amongst those who experience marginalization. It will build relationships of mutual respect and benefit. Informed by its grass-roots experience, the church can have a fresh understanding of the Common Good, embedded in parishes across the nation. The church now needs to invest resources in developing a theology of the Common Good that is both practical and credible. SRN and others can ensure that this is contextualised.

Visible Discipleship: *"Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven"* (from Matthew 5:16)

The full report is available from <http://srnet.org.uk/visible-discipleship/>.