

Building Bridges Not Walls in a Diverse World

Derek McAuley discusses seven laws of social connectivity which help us build bridges and mobilise social power to tackle the big issues.

I am not a theologian or minister so I offer no deep theological reflection. I truly believe that the purpose of religion is to make connections with the world, with others, with oneself and with the divine, the spirit, whatever phrase one wishes to use. I am also very conscious of the wise words of Margaret Mead:

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

My focus has been on the role of religion in building a better world. When I was appointed to the role of Chief Officer in late 2009, I concluded that I needed to get out there and make connections. Society has moved on from simple models of how the world works. What are our responsibilities to one another? Is there a sense that just like in the wider society there is a deeper feeling of powerlessness in the liberal progressive faith environment – not only that we are failing to use our power to promote our values, but that we are not prepared to use that power to tackle the big issues? I feel this about Unitarianism, as I told the National Unitarian Fellowship in April. I have drawn on some work by Matthew Taylor, Chief Executive of the Royal Society of Arts, and some of his colleagues who did work on *Connected Communities* (in the sense of physical communities).¹ He talks about this feeling of powerlessness leading to social pessimism. And he describes three forms of power, used here as the capacity to achieve desired objectives:

1. **Downward power of hierarchical authority**, associated most strongly with the state. Of course, this view of power characterised the Church as it developed over the centuries, right up to and encompassing much of the Reformation world in Europe. We know that global levels of trust in the leaders of government and other institutions, including the church, the press and the media have fallen to new lows. Government and business have not delivered against rising expectations. Technology has increased pressures. There has certainly

been a decline of authority.

2. **Lateral power of solidarity** and shared values, generally associated with the power of community. The past 30 years have seen a rapid decline in active membership of, and even nominal allegiance to, civic institutions such as the trade unions, political parties and the organised church. These all offer opportunities for cooperative action across significant boundaries of interest and identity, with many opportunities to develop relationships.
3. **Upward power of individual aspirations**, which tends to be associated with markets – ‘...individualism is the strongest force of our times’ – yet is problematic for both society and the individual. I attended a conference on *Post-liberalism, Individualism and Society* at the Lincoln Theological Institute last weekend. Here liberalism refers to the current political and economic structures. Post-liberalism represents thinking that challenges this consumerist model of society, thinking often based on faith positions. That disquiet, of course, has a long history; Alexis de Tocqueville observed in *Democracy in America*:

I see an innumerable multitude of men, alike and equal, constantly circling around in pursuit of the petty and banal pleasures with which they glut their souls. Each of them withdrawn into himself, is almost unaware of the fate of the rest. Mankind, for him, consists in his children and his personal friends. As far as the rest of his fellow citizens, they are near enough, but he does not notice them. He touches them but feels nothing.

Each of these forces of power has plus points and negatives:

1. Hierarchy has strategic capacity yet has a tendency to be controlling.

1. Rowson, J; Broome, S and Jones, A *Connected Communities: How Social Networks Power and Sustain the Big Society*, (RSA, London 2010).

2. Solidarity fosters selflessness but also breeds insularity and sectarianism.
3. Individualism can be creative and dynamic but selfish and irresponsible.

The solution is, in fact, ‘clumsy’: combining the three active forms of social power, while acknowledging and working with the tensions between them. Relying on one approach can be inflexible, so the way forward to address the problems we face is to mobilise all forms of social power.

Building bridges and connections is crucial to rebuilding that sense of solidarity that has been in decline. I was stimulated to read about the seven laws of social connectivity which the *Connected Communities* programme outlined:

Law 1: Six Degrees of separation, Three degrees of influence

You may have heard of Stanley Milgram’s letter-forwarding experiment in the 1960s, in which he suggested that everyone in the world is connected up to six degrees of separation. That was questioned, but in 2002 it was reinforced by a study using email data of 48,000 people. However, connection does not necessarily mean influence. Research by Christakis and Fowler indicates that our influence only extends to three degrees. Robin Dunbar claims that we have the social and cognitive capacity for up to 150 people.

Nevertheless, the research suggests a high degree of interdependence and that we do have power to influence behaviour, spread values and shape attitudes (Christakis and Fowler). So never under-estimate your power to influence others. What you do and say does have a real impact. I have been surprised by who has heard about me. One of our Unitarian ministers recently engineered an invitation to a meeting of university chaplains and others in his local city. He was surprised in conversation to hear: ‘You Unitarians and Derek McAuley have done a great job on same sex marriage. I follow him on twitter.’

Law 2: Birds of a Feather Flock Together

We shape our own network and create it in our own image; what is known as homophily. This of course means that our networks can lack diversity and access to often helpful information, ties and resources. Indeed, as well as what is known as ‘bonding’ capital – what holds us together as a group – you also need ‘bridging’ capital – those who build connections with other groups.

I would ask: are you in a metaphorical ‘gated

community’? Do you only talk to like-minded people? I ask myself how far do my links and connections go beyond the liberal progressive elements of faith and indeed politics.

At the Post-liberalism event I shared a platform with the Director of Advocacy of the Evangelical Alliance. He talked about William Wilberforce as a hero of evangelical social action (he didn’t use that term but you know what I mean). I was able to

draw from an article in *The Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society*, which shows that one of his key lieutenants in the cause of Abolition was William Smith MP for Norwich, chairman of the dissenting deputies and a Unitarian, member of Lindsey’s Essex Hall Chapel. Wilberforce was much pained at Smith’s Unitarian opinions but prepared to mix with Unitarians and other Nonconformists in defence of the causes he espoused. This caused puzzlement to many Churchmen. He worried: ‘They think that I cannot be loyal to the Established Church because I love dissenters’. Well, if Wilberforce can do it, so can you, and so can I.

Law 3: Location, Location, Location

The third aspect of networks is that they shape us, and have positive and negative aspects depending upon our position in the network. For example – as with a physical location – if you are at the centre, you get more information but can be easily contaminated if an infectious disease is going around.

Every decade we Unitarians seem to have a debate about moving our headquarters out of central London. We are in Essex Street, opposite the Royal Courts of Justice off The Strand and by Fleet Street. Why? Well, it was Lindsey’s original Unitarian chapel from 1774 in an auction house, when the City of London was densely populated. It became offices in the late nineteenth century. Yes, it probably would save us a lot of money to move, yet I would argue that it would significantly reduce our influence. Being in central



Derek McAuley supporting the Women in Leadership event at St Paul’s Cathedral on 16th July 2014



Visitors from other faiths are always welcome

Image: www.kingswoodwarwickunitarians.moonfruit.com

London makes building connections with those who matter very easy. I am two tube stops from Westminster Station. I can pop down to an event in Parliament with ease.

At the end of April it was a pleasure to attend the Annual Reception of the All-Party Parliamentary group on the Bahá'í on the Terrace of the House of Commons, convened by Louise Ellman MP. She told me that her interest arose from her Jewish background and a visit in the 1960s to the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa/Acre in Israel. She and her husband also knew of Ullet Road Unitarian Church in Liverpool. I managed to talk to Andrew Stunnell MP, former Liberal Democrat Minister and Methodist lay preacher. I also spoke to a young couple who had been married by my good friend Rev Gordon Oliver, Unitarian Minister Emeritus in Cape Town. Apparently, he conducted a lovely civil marriage ceremony for them, and had previously done so for the woman's two sisters, prior to their Bahá'í ceremonies; the latter having no legal standing. It is a small world indeed. Others I was able to talk to were Harriet Crabtree, Director of the Inter-Faith Network of the UK; Rev Patrick Morrow, Council of Christians and Jews; Andrew Copson, British Humanist Association and Robert Papini and Pedjman Khojastem of the International Association of Religious Freedom. And, I would add, it was an opportunity to enjoy the view of the Thames on a nice sunny evening.

Law 4: Imitation Drives Contagion

This concerns peer-to-peer mimicry. Is this what lies behind 'Keeping up with the Joneses', fashion trends and fads in many areas of life? It seems we like to copy people and are likely to copy those we see most frequently. Within bigger systems the more 'powerful'

organisations send out signals that others then imitate for acceptance and status. How far do we as individuals or as part of particular communities end up imitating the more powerful or the more successful, rather than 'ploughing our own furrow'?

It is sometimes uncomfortable being a Unitarian. I recall Rev Dr Ann Peart, former Principal of Unitarian College Manchester, talking about attending a Unitarian District Association event with Graham Kent, the ecumenical officer of Churches Together in Manchester. She wrote: 'As might be expected, we expressed our sadness that we as Unitarians were not accepted as full members, and were excluded from some gatherings. Graham replied that because we had important differences from mainstream Christian bodies, we must expect not to be included, and that perhaps our vocation was to be 'on the margin.' Ann went on to describe the work of Heelas and Woodhead on Kendall, which confirmed: 'Unitarian communities, placed as they are on the margins of mainstream Christianity, have the potential to bridge the different worlds of congregational life and holistic 'new-age' spirituality.' Of course many religious leaders over history, including Jesus of Nazareth, came from the margins. In building our own connections we must remain true to who we are. As the popular hymn *Spirit of Life*, often sung in Unitarian services, stresses: roots hold me close; wings set me free.

Law 5: It's Not What You Know, it's Who They Know

This law stresses the importance of belonging to groups. The traditional phrase 'it's not what you know but who you know' is only true because of who they know and how well. This is what is known as Reed's Law; network growth is geometric not arithmetic. Membership of one group breeds membership of another in a multiplier effect. Your connection to another group will significantly increase your resources. I know this from my connections across the progressive environment. We support the Accord Coalition, chaired by Reform Rabbi Jonathan Romain. We support assisted dying and were invited to a new group of faith leaders supportive of change, led by, yes, Rabbi Romain. The Accord Coalition staff member is based at the British Humanist Association office. The BHA are active with us in the Cutting Edge Consortium, which works to combat religion-based homophobia and transphobia. I can see key people regularly on real issues that matter.

Law 6: Experimentation gets Results

Networks have emergent properties that cannot be explained with reference to their parts. You cannot

predict the impact of your actions. Networks are complex systems and it is best to try things out on a small scale. For example, I do wonder how the network of individuals and organisations campaigning for same-sex marriage achieved such a major result despite being so weak in many ways. How did a consensus for not only civil but religious same-sex marriage emerge across all the political parties? How did the connections we had built between the Unitarians, Quakers, Liberal Jews and Movement for Reform Judaism have such an impact?

Law 7: Weak Ties Get you Working

Ties between people vary in strength and the nature of your connections is often more important than their number. It is interesting that opportunities, say a new job, often arise from people we do not know very well who have connections to other networks. These weak ties are only strong if they connect two strong

networks. To me this means that it is important to be grounded in a strong network. The small Unitarian movement is tremendously 'strong' and cohesive. Nearly 10% of our membership come to the Annual Meetings. Many of the same people have been around for many years in various organisational roles. In times of change organisational memory is rarely lost. So whether it is your local church community or a national network like SOF, do nurture and value it. It enables you to go out and engage in building connections with others in similarly strong networks and perhaps you can make a difference together.

Derek McAuley is the Chief Officer of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. This is an edited version of the talk he gave to the annual SOF Conference in Leicester.

With or Without God



Gretta Vosper

*On the platform in London
and Oxford*

Wednesday 24th September in London
Friday to Sunday 26th, 27th, 28th in Oxford



Gretta Vosper is an eminent Canadian author and theologian. She writes: 'I came out as an atheist in 2001. After I spontaneously preached a sermon in which I completely deconstructed the idea of a god named God, rather than fire me, the congregation chose to step out on an unmarked path.'

Gretta Vosper has been exploring themes familiar to readers of Don Cupitt's books from the angle of a whole congregation which has chosen to follow her down that route.

'There should be great value in comparing our experiences with hers, and I hope the events will be well supported by Sea of Faith members,' writes David Paterson. 'Perhaps we may develop ideas we could follow up in the next meeting of Sea of Faith in the Churches.'

For information, please look at the Sea of Faith home page, www.sofn.org.uk, or the PCN Britain website under Events, www.pcnbritain.org.uk/events. Alternatively, contact the PCN Britain office to have a flyer and booking form put in the post to you: 01594 516528, info@pcnbritain.org.uk.

London Talk:

Wednesday 24th September, Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church at 7.30pm

A PCN Event.

Oxford Conference:

Friday evening 26th to Sunday lunch 28th September, Oxford Quaker Meeting House

A joint Sea of Faith / PCN Britain event