



## SEEROUND

SEPTEMBER 2010

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**Copy deadline: 1st of  
the month preceding  
publication date.**

### The Diocese of St Albans

◆ is the Church of England in Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire, Luton, Hertfordshire and parts of the London Borough of Barnet.

◆ is made up of 334 parishes grouped into 23 deaneries, in which there are over 400 churches and 133 church schools.

◆ the 39,000 members of parish electoral rolls are served by some 235 paid clergy, around 80 non-stipendiary clergy and around 300 Readers.

### Remember:



# Big Society: *Big Con or Big Opportunity?*

David Cameron tells us he is keen on the 'Big Society'. Critics of the idea think it is little more than an attempt by the Government to cut its costs. They point out that if businesses, charities and churches provide social services then the government will not have to pay for them.

In fact, there is not a great deal of difference between obeying Gospel imperatives to care for the poor, heal the sick and transform communities, and the key Big Society ideas of citizen service, social enterprise and neighbourhood groups. Surely Christians should support the idea and get involved?

In the 1980s I visited the Amish Community in Pennsylvania and I saw at first hand their extraordinary way of life. They were descended from Swiss Anabaptists and now practise pacifism and follow a simple lifestyle. They make their own clothes and farm their land. Each family member shares in the work either on the farm or in the home. I was fascinated, therefore, to watch a reality television programme called *The World's Squarest Teenagers* about a group of Amish teenagers from the States staying with a group of British teenagers on an estate in London.

What the Amish practise is Big Society. They do not expect the State or anyone else to provide for them. They take it for granted that they should care for each other. Their understanding of mutual care and support comes not from a government eager to cut the cost of its social programmes, but from a profound sense of human interdependence.

What the television programme also revealed was a clash of how the two groups of teenagers saw themselves. To put it simplistically (and perhaps slightly unfairly) the British teenagers see themselves as independent individuals, not wanting to be constrained by anything or anyone. The Amish teenagers see themselves as part of a family and a community. When confronted with a series of murders on the London estate, the Amish were puzzled because they had never encountered such violence in their community. They were also shocked that their British counterparts could find life so boring. They said that they preferred their way of life, even if most of their spare time was taken up with work.

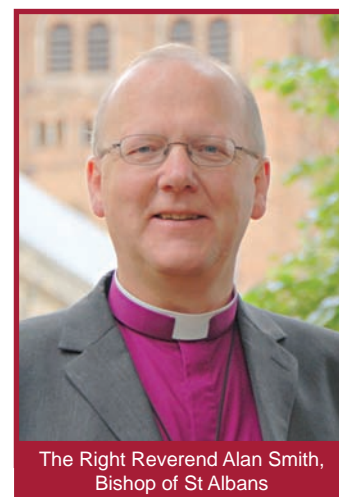
Reflecting on the programme crystallised two questions about the 'Big Society' in my mind. Not about whether it is a good idea – it patently is, although no amount of neighbourliness might help in every case, such as the recent tragic deaths in Wheathampstead where help was apparently repeatedly refused from neighbours and care services. First, I am not convinced that a government can inspire Big Society. Could our local councils have inspired people to act as Street Pastors in Bedford, Watford and Luton in the early hours of the morning? Could they have motivated the people who work with the homeless or in the many other charities that serve the people of our two counties?

Second, I'm worried about creeping bureaucracy. I fully expect that the government will try to control and monitor volunteering. They will want to be assured that the people have been trained to certain standards and that they offer help on a consistent basis. But people don't visit their neighbours when they are ill or give to a charity in order to tick a box for the local council. They may be willing to undertake some training, but they don't see themselves at the beck and call of an outside agency. They do it because they believe it is the right thing to do. We are unlikely to forge a sense of the Big Society unless and until we can recapture some shared values about our common life.

I long for communities where each person takes responsibility, where teenagers aren't bored out of their mind, and where we offer one another mutual support. But it is going to need something like the Christian vision of society to provide the motivation for it.

+ Alan St Albans.

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