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Dilemmas in Urban Mission : A Review Article

The story of how urban religion faced its final frontiers in the late 1950s, 1960s and 1970s has yet to be related by historical researchers.¹

When that history comes to be written, Peter Watherston's history of the Mayflower Centre in Canning Town, *A Different Kind of Church* (Marshall Pickering, 1994, 227 pp, £6.99, ISBN 0 551 02899 8) will be an invaluable resource. Written for the Mayflower centenary in 1994, the bulk of the book covers the period from 1958 onwards, when David Sheppard became Warden. Since then the Mayflower has been a focus for evangelical practice and thinking about urban mission. It has had high profile leadership (David Sheppard, George Burton, Pip Wilson, Roger Sainsbury); it has attracted considerable interest and financial support; large numbers of residents and volunteers have been influenced by its life and policies; its experiments and initiatives have been widely written up; and above all it has seen significant results in evangelism and urban church building, as well as its share of heartaches, frustration, and setbacks.

So it is of great value that Peter Watherston, the present Chaplain, has written such a superb history. It is readable, draws widely upon a large number of personal reminiscences (the academic phrase is 'oral history'), and is clearly organised. Watherston divides the post-1958 history into three fairly equal phases with two chapters each: 1958-70 (the Sheppard-Burton era?); 1970-82 (the Sainsbury/Wilson era?); 1982-93 (the Furness/Watherston era?). Inevitably the book reflects the perspective of the current leadership, but it also seeks to do justice to what has gone before. Differences of emphasis are allowed to be seen under the surface of events, and yet without undue intrusion or personal slanting.

The book is of wider than local importance because the changes of emphasis that one detects beneath the surface of the book's narrative, underline important questions for urban mission today. The introduction speaks of 'a church working its way through a series of conflicting pressures, hopes and fears'. The Mayflower's openness is a gift to all of us, and in the rest of this article I want to bring to the surface four questions which the last thirty-five years of Mayflower history identify for debate.

1 Callum Brown 'The Mechanism of Religious Growth in Urban Societies: British Cities since the Eighteenth Century', p 258 (in

Hugh McLeod, ed., *European Religion in the Age of Great Cities*, Routledge, London 1995).

'Happy pagans' or hopeless underclass?

One of David Sheppard's first emphases at the Mayflower was to undermine the negative stereotype of Dockland as a delinquent, distressed pariah community. His use of the phrase 'happy pagan' emphasised the ordinariness, competence, albeit deep-seated secularity, of most Eastenders. More recently, however, the negatives have come back into the light. Watherston writes of the spiritual darkness of Canning Town (pp 10-15) in a way that would have been unlikely thirty years ago.

The book marks two ways in which a deprived community of the late fifties has become a much more deprived community by the early nineties. One obvious feature is the growth in unemployment, locally intensified by the decline of the docks. Watherston is outspoken about how once again life in Canning Town has been devastated by the decisions of those who have nothing to do with the area. Closing the avenue that work opened up into adult life has left new generations locked into immaturity and violence.

More than that 'the greatest breakdown here has been in family life, once the East End's strongest asset' (p 215). The result has been growing alienation and incomprehension between the generations, which finally brought to an end the Mayflower's once strong tradition of youth work. At several points the book is aware of the tension between both illustrating the intensity of pressures that the church experiences, yet failing to do justice to the decency and competence of many people's lives. But overall the message is clear. There are strongholds of evil and darkness that threaten both the fabric of the community and the survival of the church.

Fuzzy edges or clear boundaries?

A major emphasis of the Sheppard/Burton era was to give people space and time to grow in faith. There was a friendlier, less suspicious attitude to the surrounding community and culture, which owed much to the above emphasis on the cheerful secularity of Canning Town, as opposed to pictures of godlessness or evil. In one sense this was quite an Anglican emphasis, with a positive acceptance of local culture, rather than the mission hall/pentecostal model of a distinct community clearly separated from an evil world. The strengths of the local community were emphasised, its shortcomings loyally overlooked. Uncertain and untidy boundaries in church life, and moral lapses were accepted as the cost of the church holding the trust and confidence of the local community.

Watherston's book charts the way this relationship has been renegotiated as the church has found the moral environment increasingly bleak and hostile. The Mayflower congregation clearly has more defined boundaries than it did thirty years ago, and more than would be usual for most Anglican churches. However it has moved towards a model that has a long history in urban mission, whether of the tin tabernacles of the last century, or the black churches of this. Reading between the lines, this seems to have been one of the most difficult and controversial changes made at the Mayflower in the last decade or so. That they have seen it worth the turmoil of changing direction is an important experience for other urban

churches to ponder. The Archbishop of Canterbury's preface approvingly quotes Bishop David Sheppard's encouragement for a 'ragged-at-the-edges' church; but the book's story seems to raise the question of whether clearer boundaries are necessary for the church's survival in an increasingly hostile environment.

A touchstone is the changed attitude to the charismatic movement. In the earlier period, charismatic experiences were down-played, possibly regarded as frothy and shallow middle-class indulgences, disconnected from society and unsuited for the hard experience of East End life. But recently, as maintaining a distinct Christian identity has become more important, so charismatic experiences have become more valued, empowering and articulating the faith of those accustomed to seeing themselves as worthless and empty.

Community centre or gathered church?

Traditionally a distinguishing feature of the Mayflower has been its extensive provision of social and youth activities. This gave it high visibility both in the local area, to those who used the facilities, and in the wider Christian community, through those who came as volunteers to staff them; as well as through the thinking and writing that came from the Mayflower, especially through Frontier Youth Trust.

The book documents the massive network of activities that the Mayflower sponsored, but also the tensions they generated – partly through dependence on local authority funding, partly on the strains produced by finding competent staff. Thus the last phase of the Mayflower's life has seen withdrawal from a vast apparatus of social activities. Because these were more than one urban congregation could manage, they always caused the church to be dependent on outside resources.

A theme throughout the book is Roland Allen's vision of a self-supporting, self-propagating, self-financing church. Expensive plant, at one stage employing 38 people, actually pushes that vision away from the people, rather than helps realise it. In this respect the book's title is slightly misleading – the changes of the past ten years or so have made the Mayflower more, not less like the usual kind of church, albeit a gathered non-conformist one, rather than an open Anglican one.

The book focuses the question: do prestige social service activities help or hinder the church's mission? It suggests the answer that taking on too much may actually marginalise rather than empower local Christians

Theory or faith?

Finally the book raises the question of how the theology of an urban church is produced. It indicates growing disenchantment with the sort of theology worked out by Frontier Youth Trust and other groups as 'urban' or even 'underside' theology. In reality it reflects one side of the 'incomer'/'local' tension; and whilst purporting to be theology for the inner city actually shared traditional theology's weaknesses of being theoretical and unimplementable. In particular it drew back

from the spiritual immediacy of repentance and conversion, faith and the power of the Spirit. So recently greater theological nourishment has come from the theologically uncool, charismatic emphases of Tony Higton and Hawkwell.

This has not meant a retreat from social justice and a move into pietism. Rather the re-integration of the Mayflower as a scaled-down community centre, appropriate for the life of the actual congregation has led to a more conservative theology but a more radical practice of Christian community.

Urban mission, like every other aspect of Christian life, needs constant scrutiny, so that the proper explorations of yesterday do not become the unquestioned shibboleths of today. *A Different Kind of Church* allows us to observe the latest explorations in a uniquely difficult area of Christian mission. So it is unsurprising if the explorers sometimes move in surprising, and even contradictory directions. May they continue to discern and to do God's will.

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