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URBAN MISSION

Urban Mission is now firmly on the Christian agenda. Black-led churches, unemployment, church planting, political involvement, Asian congregations, new networks, other faiths ... all come together in an exciting (and sometimes exhausting!) kaleidoscope of colour and activity.

The Anglican *Faith in the City* initiative and Methodism's *Mission Alongside the Poor* are the evidence for this within the historic denominations. Both have been energetic and urgent responses to the urban realities, within and around the churches, which have led to a multiplicity of projects.

Alongside them, and often preceding them, has sprung up a rich variety of networks and agencies. The radical 'Christians organised for social, political and economic change' (COSPEC), the 'Evangelical Coalition for Urban Mission', and the Anglo-Catholic Jubilee movement have found themselves drawn into umbrella groups, like the Urban Mission Training Association or the Urban Forum, alongside emerging forces like the West Indian Evangelical Federation.

Denominational response, para-church initiation and new forms of Christianity are the UK evidence of a world-wide concern. Books from the USA like Harvey Cox's *Secular City* and Ray Bakke's *The Urban Christian* are matched from Australia by Peter Kaldor's *Green Shoots in the Concrete* and Ron Brown's *Down and Under*. The realism of urban life in Third World cities like Calcutta, San Paulo and Mexico City has given an urgency and dynamism to mission which has been reflected in the tracks of recent major international conferences, whether they be held under the auspices of Lausanne or the WCC. The urban poor are the majority of the world's population and the urban areas are now the key mission fields of the world.

The United Kingdom is classified as the most urbanised country in the world and we certainly have the longest record of industrial and urban development. But alongside this stands the indisputable fact that Christian presence (however it is measured) is at its weakest in our urban areas.

In the past forty years Urban Mission here has passed through a series of phases as the attention and action of Christians has been focused on key issues. Each emphasis has led to a response and the current United Kingdom urban mission scene is a complex interweaving of all the factors.

It began with the inner city. We centred down on the place, the geographical area from which Christians and churches withdrew. Sociologically, we learnt about 'religious lift' and 'white flight'. Historically, we grappled with social engineering and the ghetto. Ecclesiastically, we saw the breakdown of the parish system and the commuting, non-local style of the 'gathered communities'.

Within this framework emerged the programmes of urban mission. What is the appropriate and authentic approach to the left-behind and the powerless? Evangelism and social action fused together, the mandate of Matthew 28 tied in with the manifesto of Luke 4. Church buildings were opened up to community activities, industrial mission went to the workers, church life went through a revolution or died. Analysis, research and survey preceded response and an incredible wave of projects covering housing, unemployment, evangelism, family ministry and poverty spread across the churches in the urban areas.

Next came discovery of cultural gaps and the recognition of the urban poor. This centring on people had an international dimension but a national presence. It is still hard for Christians to hear that a Government report in 1990 documents the fact that 1 in 5 of our population lives on or under the poverty line. Groups like 'Christian Action on Poverty' provide a focus for response but many of our congregations live within a world peopled by the left-behind indigenous, the job-seeking incomer and the visibly obvious immigrant. Living alongside the dispossessed and facing the biblical stress on 'bias to the poor' has been the uncomfortable and continuing

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experience for those brought up in 'the suburban captivity of the churches'.

It was the emergence of urban priorities which sharply accelerated the United Kingdom awareness of the urban issues. Government plans for urban priority areas led to a political confrontation between the Church of England and Conservative ministers over the *Faith in the City* report. Accusations of marxist clergy and manipulated statistics came as a counterblast to the prophetic stress on social justice - 'A call for action by the church and nation'. Christians in the urban struggle already knew the polarisation between 'the loony left' and the National Front face of fascism, but now they were caught up in far-reaching debates about an unjust system and the politics of power.

Since then we have known urban regeneration at a double level. Physically, massive sums of money have poured into schemes like London Docklands or the Manpower Resources Commission. People-wise, the twin prongs of immigration and gentrification have changed the human face of many urban areas. Although these tides have reached the heart of major conurbations the persisting bleakness of outlying council estates like Kirby, Liverpool, and Dagenham still colours the urban landscape.

Within all this, urban prophecy has sought to 'make the word flesh' as committed individuals, renewed congregations and fresh patterns of ministry have led to church planting and social witness. Inner London alone can point out more than five hundred new black-led, Asian, cultural, community churches in the past twenty-five years. Many of these are 'Baptistic' in belief and style and they are matched through the country. The community movement, charismatic worship and lifestyle stress have coloured and shaped these indications of spiritual life. Hundreds of young people have chosen to stay or decided to come to urban areas and scores of churches have taken off in a resurrection of life and witness.

Yet an uneasy feeling persists that urban mission is perched on top of the Christian churches - a gadfly riding on the carhorse! People are still genuinely surprised at the scale and agendas of the urban areas. They have failed to recognise both the signs of spiritual renaissance and the continuing battle with 'principalities and powers'. David Sheppard maintains that the urban agenda has not entered the bloodstream of the whole church. There is only a token response, and there is a refusal to see that vast areas of this country are, by any indices, major mission fields. There has been a physical withdrawal from, and a misunderstanding of, the urban process.

This can be illustrated in many ways. Spurgeon's College began life at the Elephant and Castle, right at the heart of London. But, like all London theological colleges, it has moved out and away, from the inner city to the suburban. The Baptist Missionary Society, even when we are faced by the presence of nationals from many Asian and African countries living in a cosmopolitan city life, finds itself constitutionally struggling with the restriction of its work to overseas only. Recent correspondence in the *Baptist Times* raised the question of the difficulty of finding ministers ready and willing to take on urban pastorates.

Beneath all this are a cluster of profoundly theological questions. They have to do with the motivation, means and message of mission in the contemporary urban world. Urban Mission begins with incarnation - 'making the word flesh' in a specific situation and style. Identification and servanthood springing out of compassion and love provide the motivation. Commuting congregations and parachute evangelists must be questioned since being, living there, becoming part of these are the life thrusts of mission.

The message carried must be holistic. Bible words like 'kingdom' and 'shalom' point to the wholeness and integration that is God's purpose for both the individual and the community. Conversion is fundamental and continuing as conversion to

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Christ, the Church and the world are experienced by each individual believer. Churches are to be alive to the Spirit and to the district. Personal evangelism and social action go hand in hand.

Ministry here is wider and deeper. All members are called into a participating, gift-sharing congregation where the dominance of the ordained is seen as de-skilling and unbiblical. Training for this ministry has to do with orientation and context.

Those who come to serve and work in the urban require an understanding of themselves and the situation to which they have come. For some years professional church workers in East London from every denomination have come together in an orientation course which was born in the casualties and confusion of incomers thinking they had the answer and understood the questions! Those who are born and belong in the inner cities require training in the context. The gathering together of men and women who have the gifts of leadership in various spheres of ministry has become an enriching and strengthening process.

Baptists are often found in the vanguard of United Kingdom urban mission. Their missionary emphasis, biblical foundation and flexibility of structure motivate and make possible a response to the cry of the city. In literature Roger Dowley's *Lost Bequest*, Roy Joslin's *Urban Harvest* and Michael Eastman's *Ten Inner City Churches* all point to scriptural underpinning, the signs of hope and the widespread earthing of mission. In projects, three very different Home Mission Fund investments in the Salford Urban Mission (an ecumenical team), the Birmingham Baptist Inner City Project (gathering together twelve churches), and the London Evangelical Coalition of Urban Mission (providing a resources network for multi-level ministry) illustrate the possibilities and diversity. Pressure groups like the Baptist Urban Group and Joppa (concerned with the other faiths) provide other focal points of Baptist thought and action.

Urban Christians have journeyed a long way in a short time, deeply aware of the many allies who join hands with us in the work. There are many surprises that go alongside the disappointments. We know that the world is with us and that God is stirring up that world. We still face unanswered questions - but there are pointers towards an emerging pattern which is true to the Gospel and relevant to urban hungers and hopes. The unanswered questions form themselves around four issues.

- (1) The sociological question centres around change and conflict. We are living through the breakdown of traditional urban communities under the combined impact of industrial rephasing, population movement and social forces. The arrival of the other faiths in force has moved us into pluralism in the realms of religion, the impact of immigration has led to a multi-racial society, and the backlash of racism and economic factors have created an underclass of deprived and bitter people. The churches, too, have 'new wine' pressures within them and are drawn into the wider social shifts. What now holds together such disparity and where is the glue for the mosaic of pieces?
- (2) The political question focuses on justice and 'shalom'. The manifest inequalities in British society and the perpetuation of these are now clear to all. Issues like the poll tax and other aspects of social legislation which militate against the interests of people who are already disadvantaged sharpen the point for Christians. Where do we stand politically? No-one can work in the inner city without facing the question of power and politics. No Christian can operate without re-reading the Bible to see what God wills for society.
- (3) The ecclesiastical question has to do with the historical denominations and the

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ecumenical movement. Traditional structures have broken down in the urban areas - they no longer fit. The main-line churches now find themselves outnumbered in many areas by the new churches. Pastoral maintenance is giving way to mission strategy. In this world, can church planting function within the Inter Church Process? Who carries authority and where are the parameters?

- (4) The theological question concerns the nature of the Gospel. The whole church must carry the whole Gospel to the whole world. It is therefore comprehensive in scope or marginalised. It is taking Jesus seriously and taking Him seriously into all of life.

There is an emerging pattern for urban mission which holds together all the elements and is a realistic and powerful agency for the whole Gospel. Within this overall thrust are the tools of mission which are already available and will become more visible.

At the heart of urban mission is the base community. This is the neighbourhood cell that holds together the two-legged approach of Bible and current issues. Believers come together in small groups for prayer, Bible obedience, sharing and being. These street-level communities of belief are the building blocks of the congregation and the direct, face-to-face bridge for the Gospel. In an atomised society they provide a sense of belonging, in the focusing on real issues they offer relevance, and in the discipline of prayer and scripture they build on faith and grow into mission.

Local congregations draw together in neighbourhood cells as they come together for a full service of worship and teaching. Many participate in a lively, loving fellowship of proclamation and praise. Music is vital, preaching is simple, prayer is corporate and fellowship is real. Much of the baggage of the past has gone as uniformed groups, single-sex groups and committees have disappeared. Often there is one, much longer worship service for all with options for contracting out that are dependent upon the stage of commitment or pilgrimage.

The celebration grouping brings together a cluster of congregations and enables larger area groupings to strengthen faith, allow the formation of issue-centred groups, and take the Gospel to the area through public demonstration. In all this black and white congregations will mingle, denominational lines be broken and new forms of leadership-sharing will be seen.

From the cells, congregations and clusters will come the task forces set aside for mission. Those engaged in church planting will learn from each other, politicians will support and face each other, sector ministries in education or care will encourage or teach. Here experience and gifts will complement and skills and opportunities will be matched. Coalitions and consortiums of faith will cross over old lines and create fresh patterns.

Communication and collaboration will take place through regional and national networks. Some, like the 'Zebra' project, will draw Christians across race divides. Others, like the Frontier Youth Trust, will service those working with young people on the frontiers of our society. Some, like Church Action on Poverty will become a national rallying point. Others, like the Urban Forum, will be a hidden force for change. Already these networks have moved across the local, city-wide, regional, national and international lines. They are the resource and communication carriers for the urban armies intent on sharing faith.

Clarity of message and comprehension of life are both required in a complex and confusing urban society. The historic strength of urban mission is that it has drawn from, and struggles to hold together, all the biblical and theological strands carried

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by the denominational and new churches. Nowhere is this more clear than in the shifts seen in the ecumenical and evangelical worlds.

In 1968 George Beasley-Murray quoted, in his Baptist Union Presidential address, from the World Council of Churches Evanston statement:

Jesus Christ is the Gospel we proclaim . . . To evangelise is to participate in his life and in his ministry to the world . . . Evangelism is the bringing of persons to Christ as Saviour and Lord that they may share in his eternal life. Here is the heart of the matter. There must be personal encounter with Christ. For on this relationship to God in Christ depends the eternal destiny of man.

In 1989 the newsletter of World Vision International can support the Lausanne Movement in its stress on the marriage of personal evangelism and social concern with the comment:

The vast majority of the unreached people of the world are poor. If the world is to be evangelised the poor must see the Gospel as good news. From a purely evangelistic strategy, with no other desire but to see these people become Christians, any plan to communicate that good news must deal with poverty. From a biblical point of view to preach about the saving grace of Jesus' life, death and resurrection without demonstrating that grace is a contradiction. The road to Jericho does set its own agenda.

Urban mission, like Jesus, must start where people are and share with them the wholeness of the Gospel, making the word flesh, offering shalom to all. The real hope of urban mission in this country is that it now carries, in all its failure and frustration, many signs of hope and renewal. Mission has been and is being made real in the urban places of the United Kingdom.

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