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# The BAPTIST QUARTERLY

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## BAPTISTS IN THE CITY

People often lament the state of our cities, as though the deprivation, squalor and crime had never been so bad before. The historian brings a healthier perspective, more balanced and therefore less despairing. The Christian should be able to bring hope. In this year, when the Baptist Union has a President known for his active concern for urban mission, the *Quarterly* looks at Baptists in the city. Urban work today is set alongside examples from the past. Earlier methods would not be appropriate now, yet it may be encouraging to find modern themes recurring in past contexts: going to people where they are, indigenous leadership, the suitability of ministerial training. In today's setting, these raise some hard questions for Baptists at large, not only for those seeking to make the Good News known in the city.

## THE THEOLOGY OF URBAN MISSION

### THE EMERGENCE OF URBAN MISSION

Urban Mission in the United Kingdom is now a subject in its own right and is developing a theology of its own. Books, groups, personalities, and projects are always the outriders of a spiritual movement and there is now much evidence that urban mission has come to stay and is rooted in deep theological soil. The titles of the books and the groups tell their own story and reflect the emerging theological emphases.

David Sheppard's *Built as a City* (1975) was the first British book to take the urban mission agenda seriously. But it was the analytical work of pioneers like Ted Wickham's book on Sheffield, *Church and People in an Industrial City* (1957) that sketched the realities and pointed towards a response.

Small groups like the Frontier Youth Trust (working with urban youth), the Evangelical Urban Training Programme (targeting on working-class evangelism), the Shaftesbury Project (urban research) and Evangelical Christians for Racial Justice (that speaks for itself!) flagged up the themes in the 1960s/70s.

Emerging national networks like the Evangelical Coalition for Urban Mission (ECUM) and the radical Christian Organisations for Social, Political and Economic Change (COSPEC) grew up alongside the Anglo-Catholic *Jubilee* in the 1980s. They have been matched denominationally by Methodism's *Mission Alongside the Poor* and the Anglican *Faith in the City*, which developed from the Archbishop's Commission on Urban Priority Areas.

Behind all the national emphases the concerns of the wider evangelical world have been changing. The Lausanne Conference (1974) firmly married personal faith and social action. The follow-up conference (Consultation on World Evangelisation) that I attended in 1980 in Thailand saw the strength of a radical group committed to biblically-based social justice, and produced booklets on Christian outreach to the Urban Poor/Large Cities. Wheaton (1983) followed up with stress on social transformation, written up in *The Church in response to Human Need* by Chris Sugden and Vinay Samuel and embodied in the international journal *Transformation*. Out of this ferment sprang Waldron Scott's *Bring Forth Justice*, which sought to integrate mission, discipleship and social justice.

In the United Kingdom, the gathering momentum of Urban Mission (fuelled by widespread rioting and political realisation) earthed these themes in our own culture. The Nationwide Initiative on Evangelism in 1980 saw Baptists in the heart of this as Lewis Misselbrook wrote *Residents of Council Housing Estates*, Michael Eastman *Young People at Risk* and I contributed on *The Urban Poor*. New words and phrases (justice, poor, cross-culture, church planting) were entering our Christian vocabulary.

A spate of books picked up the themes. Our own Roy Joslin contributed *Urban Harvest* (1982), written from a 'reformed' viewpoint. David Sheppard's *Bias to the Poor* (1983) followed the Anglican Michael Paget-Wilkes' *Poverty, Revolution and the Church* (1982) and the Methodist John Vincent's *Into the City* (1982).

But it was the Anglican *Faith in the City* Report of 1985 that lifted the debate to the national stage. That report revealed both the

structural dimensions and the church weakness - it also highlighted the political dis-ease with Christians becoming involved in social issues. From that report flowed the Church Urban Fund, serious questions about clergy training, new forms of Christian presence and a continuing political debate about the nature of society and the biblical patterns.

Now theological reflections were surfacing rapidly from the inner cities themselves. From Liverpool came Dave Cave's *Jesus is your best mate* (1985), which told the story of evangelism in a white working-class culture, paralleled by Pip Wilson's *Gutter Feelings* (1985) about youth work in East London. I wrote *Signs in the City* (1985) and put together the bleak social signs and the positive spiritual signs in the inner cities. *Making Unemployment Work* (1985) by Michael Moynagh and *Belief in a Mixed Society* (1985) by Christopher Lamb tackled the social problem of employment and the accelerating power of the other faiths now planted in Britain's urban areas. More recently *Ten Inner City Churches* (1988), edited by Michael Eastman, tells the stories of congregations, while *Building Bridges* (1988) by Philip Mohabir is the first major contribution from the growing black-led churches.

#### PHASES IN URBAN MISSION

Within and beneath this theological turmoil can be discerned a pilgrimage in successive phases. Those of us who have been drawn into this maelstrom have been taken through key-themes and led into a developing understanding of theological roots and responses.

*Inner City* was the first phase. This was the centring of attention on places. These were the areas in the United Kingdom where the social needs were greatest and the Christian Church weakest. From these areas Christians fled and in these areas Christian presence was minimal and declining. But it was to these areas that immigrants came.

*Urban Mission* was the umbrella title for the multi-faceted response. This has moved from the despair of failure into a mood of vigour and hope. The programme of urban mission has centred around evangelism and social action - but has been compelled to move into political struggle. The emphasis on evangelism has followed the recognition that church affiliation in the inner cities of the United Kingdom is below the level of all the major mission-fields of the world (apart from Moslem countries) and has been so for generations - therefore church-planting is stressed and hundreds of new congregations (500 in London alone) have been born. The stress on social action has been carried in the massive community programmes which have drawn Christians into the fields of housing, employment, racism and poverty, and raised profound theological questions. The constant balancing of Matthew 28 (Go into the world) and Luke 4 (Good News to the Poor) has been a feature of this phase and has had its influence on the wider church (e.g. Action in Mission!).

*Urban Poor* became a key-phrase from 1980. The World Council of Churches in Melbourne, the evangelical consultation in Thailand and the papal visit to Latin America all followed each other in quick succession and all saw the break-down of First World theological and institutional dominance, the recognition that the largest human grouping in the world was the urban poor, and the realisation that biblical teaching on 'poor' had been evaded by world Christianity.

'Liberation theology' in Brazil was only one manifestation of response. From all sides - demographic, politics, social analysis - came the evidence for the shift in life-style from rural to urban and from sufficiency to poverty. Theology now became more personalised and more political - personal in the new stress on people and the individuals 'sinned against as well as sinning' and political in the search for justice and redistribution of resources.

*Urban Priority* began with the Conservative Government and was taken up by the Anglican Church! Urban Priority Areas were a serious political initiative to focus attention on the inner city areas, the social programmes and urban people. When the church entered that arena the national theological debate took off! Discussion about the decisions on priorities involves taxes, discrimination and policies. We are still in the middle of a deepening and crucial theological-political debate about wealth-creation and poverty, about justice and stewardship, about power and prophecy - and this debate concerns us all.

*Urban Prophecy* is the attempt to live out belief. Across the country the endeavour to earth, embody and proclaim the Gospel in life-style and presence is expressed in many ways. The community movement is matched by deepening fellowship life in congregations; the Roman Catholic dispersal of the Orders into urban cells runs alongside charismatic 'togetherness'; the gathering together of cultural congregations (whether Caribbean or Asian) is paralleled by the arrival of hundreds of 'incomers' from suburban churches; and celebration worship links hands with political demonstration.

These phases do not always occur chronologically but the last twenty-five years have seen these emphases gripping and shaping congregational life, denominational strategy and individual discipleship. Places, programmes, people, priorities and prophecy may make an intriguing litany of alliteration - but they are also the realities which have either pushed us into theological reflection or the routes we have travelled after theological-biblical truth has gripped us. Beneath and within all these emphases can be discerned theology: in the concluding section of this article I want to draw out some of the theological insights and implications of urban mission.

#### UNDERLYING THEOLOGY

Each phase of urban mission has either sprung from, or been compelled to re-discover, fundamental theological motifs. That theology has been hammered out in the crucible of experience and not the seclusion of a study. It has been marked by a return to biblical roots and by a developing lay movement.

The geographical emphasis on the place, the inner city, is matched by the theology of *incarnation*. In John's Gospel 'the word is made flesh' (John 1.14) and Paul speaks of the one who 'took the nature of a servant. He became like man and appeared in human likeness' (Phil. 2.5-11). The Gospel begins with being - and being there. God's pattern of identification and involvement is not answered by commuting congregations, fragmented participation or parachutist evangelists who come briefly - and go quickly! In biblical history the purposes and grace of God are made real by committed people in specific places - Moses in Egypt, Jonah in Nineveh and Jesus at Calvary.

Urban mission itself has pushed Christians into a renewal of the

understanding of the theology of *mission* - in terms of width and depth. The equation of evangelism and mission has been challenged - mission is now seen in a total sense, embracing evangelism but holding together social action and political justice. Matthew 28 and Luke 4 join hands. The language of mission among inner city activists moves from church planting to unemployment, from political involvement to cross-cultural communication, from confrontation with other faiths (especially Muslim) to concern about racism. In this sense mission becomes inclusive and total.

But a deeper note has been struck. Death and resurrection are more than Bible words. They have become the experience of congregations and individuals within the inner city. Paul's prayer that he might 'know the fellowship of his sufferings and the power of his resurrection' becomes contemporary as inner city Christians enter the hurt and work towards the healing of the urban people and communities.

The concern for the urban poor sprang from, and is sustained by, the consistent biblical emphasis on the value of each human being, made in the 'image of God'. The theological *doctrine of man* is a constant reminder that individuals are the object of God's love and are to be partner's with Him in His work. The marginalised are centralised; it is Christian belief that the single-parent, the elderly, the vagrant and the abandoned are those loved by Jesus in the New Testament and by His people today. People matter and they matter to God. The fundamental belief in the worth, dignity and destiny of each individual is proclaimed in the face of the depersonalisation, collectivism and racism of contemporary culture.

The debate about urban priorities has taken the British church into areas of theology that are proving to be uncomfortable and divisive. The biblical stress on Kingdom, the modern uncertainty about society and the controversy about religion and politics point to unresolved tensions and a theological agenda that is still surfacing. Beneath the theology of *society* and the role of the Church lie profound issues - the insidious corruption of institutions as well as individuals is represented by the stress on structural sin and the assertion that many among the urban poor are 'sinned against, as well as sinning'.

Finally, the note of urban prophecy picks up the principle of doing rather than saying, of representing visually what is not heard audibly. The endeavour to flesh out the Gospel in community living or personal life-style owes much to the holistic theme of *shalom*. Wholeness for the individual, the healing of relationships and the unity of the community are all key-notes in the over-all *shalom* belief which refuses to allow religion to become purely cerebral or personalised.

#### WORKING OUT THEOLOGY

The working out of the theology of urban mission has profound implications for the whole church. These include the rediscovery of Bible themes which have been ignored or disobeyed; the emergence of a model for theological reconstruction; the questioning of the accepted programmes of theological training; and a relevance that springs from the issue-centred realities that demand a response.

The *rediscovery of Bible themes* like justice, jubilee, and *shalom* have been made by a generation of urban activists - in the Third

World, the U.S.A. and the U.K. The stress of the Third World on freedom from oppression has led to liberation theology (and it should be studied in context rather than dismissed as alien to the U.K.) and the black-white divide in U.S.A. society has seen the emergence of justice as a key issue. Here in the United Kingdom books like Roger Dowley's *Towards the rediscovery of a lost bequest* - a layman's work-book written by a Baptist who has spent his life-time in inner London - have become standard text-books for many of us.

The *emergence of a model* has been seen in the base community. The Consultation on World Evangelisation report in 1980 spoke of the unanimous conclusion of the working party on urban poor:

We believe the basic strategy of the evangelisation of the urban poor is the creation or renewal of communities in which Christians live and share equally with others. These communities function as a holistic, redemptive presence among the poor, operate under indigenous leadership, demonstrate God's love, and invite men, women and children to repentance, faith and participation in God's Kingdom.

This two-legged approach, walking between the Bible and urban issues, is evident within the network of home-cells which lies behind the thrusting, new churches of the British inner cities.

The questioning of traditional programmes of *theological training* has come from two directions. The casualty rate among the professional ministry led church leaders in areas like East London to an induction course that prepared incoming leaders by a process of participation and reflection; this has now been running for five years and involves an unlearning before authentic ministry can begin. The strong cultural bonds of the black-led churches initiated a series of leadership-training groups in the context which have been followed elsewhere by a wide range of urban programmes for gifted laypeople who do not wish to go to a theological college but prepare for leadership in their own context.

The relevance of a theology that springs from *issue-centred* reality is illustrated by the study-book *New Humanity* by Sue Conlan and Maurice Hobbs, which takes the biblical material on race and justice and sets it against the painful history of British racism. Both the writers have been heavily involved professionally and personally in race issues and have shared in the group Evangelical Christians for Racial Justice. They, like other groups centred around politics, unemployment or poverty, have been compelled to rediscover the Bible themes that alone can make an adequate foundation for response and action.

The theology of urban mission is now much more than a hopeful phrase. The evidence of books and projects, the historical pilgrimage of the urban church set out in the distinct phases and the underlying theological roots all come together in a strongly interwoven tapestry of pattern and colour that has already changed inner city Christians and now reaches out to question and challenge the prevailing theologies of the British denominations - not least the Baptists!

COLIN MARCHANT *President of the Baptist Union of Great Britain*  
1988-89