

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

put Christian teaching or Biblical testimony to a God active in the national history of His people alongside their own story, and so be able to assess in its light their main work in life. They will not naturally expect to find Christ back in the social struggle, and discover how to communicate there the Good News for the poor.

Not surprisingly, groups find it unnatural to concentrate on each stage of the circle in turn. People reject the formality of religion anyway! Maybe the realistic and natural way forward is to appreciate and capitalise on what is happening naturally, in each group activity which emerges, and encourage people to 'round out' their relationships by integrating informally as many of the elements of the circle as can naturally be introduced. We are still a long way from a people committed to practising corporately a spirituality for the inner city, and developing their own theology of how God will liberate our society and transform the principalities and powers of our day. But every difficulty is a growing pain, every struggle a learning point. The invitation needs to be always there. My hope is that at least a few in each group will respond to the invitation and take up the spiritual challenge.

One hopeful avenue to 'completing the circle' is to hold parties! After all, Jesus used parties as a sign of the Kingdom already here and a symbol of the Kingdom to come. At parties we tie up loose ends, correct misunderstandings, open up to one another and share deeper thoughts, rejoice in one another and in common causes, make plans for future action. They can create links often short-circuited in the fret of joint activity in community projects.

The truth and love of God is realised in relationships, and this is how we discover ourselves and develop personally. People in inner city communities know that instinctively; society needs to acknowledge their strengths to become wholesome, balanced and caring. We have a God who works and reveals himself only through relationships. The Church must realise that the Good News in Christ will be realised (made real) only at this level. We respond to Him in the midst of life in society and then articulate our experience of Him in praise and repentance in Christian worship. There He gives us the confidence and hope to go out to find and celebrate him in our actions with others, and so discover how to create a more just and human society.

KEITH ARGYLE *Member of staff team, Salford Urban Mission*

THE INNER CITY CHURCH

IN A MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

In 1983 the authorities in New York City thought of a novel way of improving the image of the Bronx for commuters travelling on a major expressway. They spent a few hundred dollars painting windows with curtains on huge sheets of vinyl and then erected the whole facade on the front of derelict, though inhabited, housing apartments. Some similar cosmetic exercises have been taking place in this country too. It was the riots in the early 1980s that reminded us sharply of the serious issues going on in the city. Churches have been closing over

the last few decades and usually the numerically growing fellowships are in the suburbs. What is the role of the inner-city church?

AWARENESS

The starting point lies in the church's awareness of two dimensions of experience: the one is biblical and theological, and the second is in our perception of the world around us. Firstly, even in a cursory look at the Old Testament, we discover that the Israelites are to 'love the stranger'(1) and to pay attention to the needs of the poor and disadvantaged.(2) The eighth-century prophets, like Amos, railed against the material affluence of the day which 'oppressed the poor' and 'crushed the needy', with the pleas, 'let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream'.(3) According to Jeremiah, the 'knowledge of God' includes justice, as does true worship.(4) Release from all forms of slavery is a hallmark of the Gospel of the Kingdom which Jesus proclaimed, including forgiveness, the setting free from guilt, or care for the beggar.(5) In the famous parable of the Good Samaritan it is the 'outsider' who is commended for displaying a compassion and action which transcends the barriers of race.(6) What is more, Jesus identified with the poor and oppressed: 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me'.(7)

An encouraging sign of hope in recent years is the recognition that this theology of the Kingdom is being taken much more seriously by the Church. Although the battle lines between personal salvation and social gospel are still being waged in some quarters, there has been a growing awareness that faithfulness to the whole gospel embraces both these aspects. Hans Kung writes that the Kingdom of God 'consists not merely in forgiveness and conversion, but also in the redemption and the liberation of the body and in the transformation and consummation of the world'.(8) We are beginning to grasp what the Lordship of Christ means in terms of Creation. This task of developing our biblical and theological understanding of such concepts as the Kingdom of God, salvation, and stewardship of creation must be an ongoing one because it provides a basic framework for insight and action.

The second dimension of experience for the inner-city church is the awareness of what is happening in the city itself. It needs to recognise the vinyl facades for what they are. Take a walk around the down-town areas of any major industrial city of this country and look and listen. A common story emerges. You will see inadequate housing, high unemployment and high mortality rates. In Rusholme, adjacent to Moss Side in Manchester, you will observe people queuing up outside a breadshop at 8.30 a.m. to get yesterday's bread at reduced prices. Schools are often overcrowded, with inadequate resources. Talk to some black young people and you will hear of their frustrations, including their particular difficulties in getting jobs. In the inner city we see, in the words of David Jenkins, people who are 'lost in a wilderness of social incoherence, uncertainty and alienation'.(9)

How do we handle such direct experience? Some deny the harshness of this and would claim that it is conjecture or exaggeration. In an E.E.C. survey on *Perceptions of Poverty in Europe* (1977) England headed the list of those interviewed who denied the existence of poverty here (64%). Of those who accepted that poverty did exist, 43% thought it was due to laziness or a lack of will

power. Yet, it is important to realise that the visual impressions gained from walking around the inner city can be verified by recent reports and statistics. The National Housing Forum reckons we face a housing crisis with the number of homeless families increasing at over 10% a year. 'There is a lack of available homes that ordinary people can afford'.(10) The gap between rich and poor is widening.(11) This is becoming more visible where new private housing developments are being built in the inner city. Unemployment in the inner-city is higher than in the suburbs.(12) In July 1988 Professor Peter Townsend concluded a research project into 'Inner City deprivation and premature death in Greater Manchester', by highlighting the fact that in the inner city areas like Hulme and Moss Side the mortality rate between 1981 and 1983 was 63% higher than the national average.(13) In a survey of young people leaving Bradford Schools in July 1983, only 7% of the black youngsters had obtained a job by September, contrasting with 37% of their white peers.(14) The anger and frustration, especially of young blacks, have to be listened to urgently if there is not to be more serious civil unrest. Martin Luther King describes riots as 'the voice of the unheard' or, in Professor Bostet's phrase, 'riots are the politics of the excluded'.(15) All these reports and observations raise serious questions about the structures within our society and how wealth and opportunity are shared and distributed.

How can this situation be shared more effectively? Well-produced printed materials make their own impact. There is the continued need to disseminate information through statistics and reports. Alongside this, the human stories, the faces behind the cold statistics, need to be made known. Television, video and radio can play a vital role in raising awareness. Music and drama are powerful educational tools. There is no substitute for direct experience, but we have to be aware of the danger of exploitation and of treating people as objects of curiosity.

Inner-city churches need to be acutely sensitised to what is going on. An old Indian proverb states: 'Do not criticise your neighbour until you have walked a mile in his moccasins'. Yet we need to recognise that the unprecedented rates of change which have taken place have had significant effects on church life in our inner cities. The older members in our congregations have experienced these changes, where derelict mills pay homage to once thriving industries. Populations have shifted and, in some of the inner cities, people from what are called the 'ethnic minorities' are in the majority. Nevertheless, the reality of inner-city life has to be faced by Christians in these churches, together with realistic reassessments in terms of buildings which may be far too large for current needs. Pastoral sensitivity is needed to assist some Christians, who have been faithful disciples, to come to terms with all the changes.

APPROPRIATE INVOLVEMENT

Arising from increased awareness is the challenge of appropriate involvement. The translation of insight to action is the most urgent task. The nature of the involvement will be determined by our understanding of the Gospel. We wrestle with what it means to be 'light' and 'salt' in the world. Incarnation has been described as God 'in our shoes', identifying in Christ with humanity in all its strength and weakness, triumph and vulnerability. Compassion and action

combine to work for a society with more authentic marks of God's Kingdom upon it. We work for a community in which each person is seen as having worth and dignity.

The pressing matter of living in a multi-cultural, multi-faith society has to be faced wherever we live. Christians hold a wide variety of views on other faiths, ranging from those who believe all non-Christian faiths are totally evil to those who see each of the major world faiths as equally valid routes to God.(16) Part of the agenda for churches in multi-cultural areas is to learn what the major faiths believe, to alleviate ignorance. Then we need to tease out what is meant by such terms as 'evangelism', 'dialogue' and 'witness'. To listen, to learn and to respect does not mean to deny the opportunity of 'being ready to give an account of the hope within you'.(17) Moreover, the institutional church has been so identified with the so-called 'middle class' that there have been great difficulties in building bridges with 'working class' people. The result often has been that the rejection of the church has been identified with a rejection of the Christian gospel. The awareness of cultural baggage is vital for Christian mission.(18) Also, language which talks about 'what can we do for the poor, or the blacks, in the city?' reveals a paternalistic attitude. If Christ is to be 'incarnate' as a presence in the inner city, this has to become flesh in human lives who can identify with the community.(19)

The first key word to describe our involvement is that the church's mission must be 'local'. Report after report in recent years has emphasised that the Christian community within the city must reflect local culture in its worship and manner of evangelism and this can only be developed with integrity when there is indigenous leadership. This is the ideal; the reality in many of our inner city churches is rather different.

What image is conveyed to a local community, with few car owners (and if a car is owned it is usually an older model) when the street around the church is lined with new cars on Sunday mornings? This is a painful question to ask, but it needs to be faced. Yet if many Christians had not commuted to worship, more of our churches would have closed down years ago. Even with the limitations of 'travelling in' to work and witness, there are good examples of the Gospel being shared with a passionate concern for the locality. Many workers, such as teachers, doctors, social and community workers travel into the city to work and are making a marked contribution to the welfare of the city.

To develop a more local Christian presence surely needs a nucleus of people who live and work in the community. Whilst you become more aware of community issues if you spend more time in the local streets, the acute sensitivity to local issues will only arise when you chat with your neighbour, use the local shops and send your children to the local school. The threat of the National Front who are smashing the windows of local Asian shops becomes a more vital item for concern at a Church Members' Meeting when you are living in the area. Yet even this is not total identification. Many of us who have lived in the inner city have done this through choice, while we are living with people who have no choice, a further reminder of powerlessness. Where Christians are living in the inner city, or moving in, it is essential that there is a support network. Isolated individuals can soon be crushed. The same applies to some of our municipal housing estates which are also Urban Priority Areas.

When 'local' is taken seriously, there is no blueprint that can be put forward as to what the church should *do*. In *being* the church, immersed in the local scene, opportunities will arise naturally. Sometimes it will be through the resources of church buildings which can meet particular community needs. Christians can get involved in community activities such as 'residents groups', and, on an individual basis, teaching English to Asian women. In multi-racial areas the existence of racial discrimination will become obvious. Together with problems over unemployment, you will hear of discrimination in housing where, for example, the first black family moving into a street can be subjected to ostracism and abuse.(20) What does all this say about the dignity and value of every human being? Nor are church congregations immune from some of these prejudicial attitudes. Heather Walton's research into *Black people in British Methodism* can be reflected in other denominations too.(21) Amongst the fastest growing churches in this country are the black Pentecostals and this is not only because of cultural identity or theological reasons. Many West Indians felt unwelcomed by the churches in this country.

In the desire to keep 'local', other unexpected opportunities can arise. In October 1987 a Baptist/United Reformed Church in Chorlton, Manchester agreed to provide sanctuary for a thirteen year old Bangladeshi girl, Salema Begum, who was due to be deported because the immigration authorities doubted that she was the genuine daughter of a couple living in Oldham. Lacer the family relationship was proved through a blood test. Similar cases have made many inner city churches aware of the desperate plight of 'divided families' and the offer of sanctuary is receiving a higher profile.(22) Allied to this is the profoundly unjust Nationality Act and increasing concern about immigration procedures which impose restrictions especially on those who come from particular countries. The British Council of Churches and Evangelical Christians for Racial Justice are amongst a number of agencies which provide information on these issues.(23)

Being involved 'locally' helps Christians to appreciate the joys of the inner city. The strong sense of community in local streets bears testimony to a sense of solidarity which is often missing in the suburbs. The wit and humour from those who face many struggles brings its own encouragement as does the tenacity of those who are prepared to work in the inner city for sustained periods of time. The local Council of Churches in Bradford helped to organise a multi-cultural festival, with the young people from the community taking part in dance, drama or music. Parents and other residents met together to enjoy the whole occasion and all our lives were enriched through the experience.

The word 'network' is another key word to place alongside 'local'. For mission to be effective in the inner city there need to be networks denominationally, ecumenically and with the secular agencies. Baptist churches outside the inner city can be a lifeline in the network of support. Firstly, they can use opportunities for making their congregations aware of the challenges in the inner city and the realities people face there. Some of the 'twinning' arrangements are proving useful in this. Secondly, people in suburban churches often hold positions of responsibility and have some measure of influence in the structures of British society which they can use for the benefit of all. Thirdly, within our denomination networking can take place through active support for more initiatives in inner-city mission, through such resources as Home Mission. Throughout recent decades,

as the churches of the inner city have closed down, the money has often been used in areas where there is more likelihood of faster, visible fruit. Yet the Christian presence amongst countless thousands of people has been progressively withdrawn. However, many of these new urban initiatives cannot be evaluated by criteria such as numerical growth. Other features of Kingdom life have to be used to monitor them. Also, there needs to be good communication between those who are pioneering appropriate forms of mission and the main body of the Church, so that each can inform, challenge, enrich and encourage the other.

'Networking' ecumenically has to be high on the agenda of inner-city churches too. *Better Together* is a fitting title for the book written by David Sheppard and Derek Worlock as they discuss their 'Christian partnership in a hurt city'. Compelling arguments can be advanced for working ecumenically so that the Christian presence is more effective in a particular community. Sometimes the Holy Spirit works through economic circumstances where an individual church cannot sustain its witness. There has been an unhealthy spirit of competition between some churches which still lingers on in some places. Yet the motive for ecumenism must be rooted in the prayer of Jesus that his followers might be one 'so that the world may believe it was you who sent me'.(24) The common task of the urgency of mission in the inner city must surely be the motivating factor for ecumenical networks. As Sheppard and Worlock write in the context of Liverpool, where sectarian bitterness between Protestants and Roman Catholics has caused so much strain: 'The Church is to be a sign of the unity of those who believe in Christ. It cannot be a faithful sign if it is itself divided and torn apart'.(25) The fostering of such ecumenical work needs to be developed at grass roots level as well as amongst church leaders.

In our 'networks' for mission we must not neglect opportunities of working with those who may or may not share our Christian commitment. For too long the church has wanted to be the dominant partner and assumes uneasily a servant role. The grace of God is revealed in people who may not name the name of Christ as they work to create a more humane, equitable society. Many Christians are participating actively in community groups.(26) When the church at Chorlton in Manchester was asked to give sanctuary to Salema Begum, we learnt much from working with those who do not share Christian faith but who have a deep commitment to a just society. Often there is stimulating discussion and debate with others in community groups and fresh insights and common ground are discerned together.(27)

The manner of a church's involvement as salt and light in society is enhanced or hindered by its understanding of ministry. A clerically-dominated model thwarts participation by the laity. Even in traditions which talk of the 'priesthood of all believers' clericalism can be prevalent. The significant influence of patterns of ministerial training are also important here. In the autumn of 1987, five people involved in theological education in the Third World visited many English centres where students are prepared for ministry. They observed: 'There was insufficient preparation for and engagement in the life of society and in the issues faced in a secular British society'.(28) In our Northern Baptist College we are developing an integrated pattern of training where the intellectual, the practice of ministry and personal experience are brought together. For the first two years of their training students are placed in local community

agencies in Hulme and Moss Side, as well as in local churches in the same area. Through reflection together, culminating in worship, we seek to promote a style of ministry which is earthed in the reality of the community.

WORSHIP

If we are to develop awareness of the world around us, and be involved appropriately as Christian disciples, the centrality of worship is crucial. Worship and mission are inextricably related, yet the danger is to keep them in separate compartments.(29) Bringing 'worship' to the living God affects every part of life. As we offer our praise and adoration, and sense the awesome holiness of God, we are reminded that God is the Creator of all humanity. Our unworthiness is reflected in confession. As we bring our thanksgivings we are also more aware of the needs of those around us. Repentance includes our shared involvement in the structures which oppress others in society.(30) The Word of God, heard through Scripture and sermon, comes to challenge, liberate and encourage us. Our response to the Word is reflected in our prayers of intercession, where we bring in love our concerns for the needs of the world, including our own community. But we do not bring our prayers with the hope that they will be answered without any effort on our part. The Peace reminds us that we are part of one body, and we need each other. The offering symbolises the giving of ourselves to co-operate with God in the work of the Kingdom. With strengthened wills, energised by grace through the Holy Spirit, we resolve to keep more closely to the vision of God for his world. When the ingredients of our worship are understood in this way, we cannot escape from the world and our calling to be disciples in it. Communities like Taize and Iona are significant reminders to us of this intrinsic connection between worship and mission, but each local church must develop its own pattern.

As it faces the future the inner city church, in partnership with the worldwide church, needs to build on these three pillars of growing awareness, appropriate involvement and relevant worship. It is in the sharing of bread and wine that we celebrate the hope of the Gospel. The grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies in order to bear fruit.(31) Here in the death and resurrection of Christ we see the divine pattern which shatters our prejudices, opens our eyes to greater depths in eternal love and clears our vision to see more poignantly the fragmentation of society. We offer the brokenness to our gracious God and we are beckoned to follow in the way of Christ and his mission. The task is so urgent and we enter into partnership with all who go in Christ's direction. The road involves cross carrying, being ready to stand by the oppressed and the 'stranger' and to champion their cause. Some of the old, cherished attitudes will have to be put to death. It is costly in terms of popularity but obedience to Christ will not permit the building of facades to hide from reality. Seeds growing quietly are symbols of the kingdom, speaking of patience and persistence. Green shoots are appearing as signs of hope, reminding the church that the risen Christ shares in the struggle.

NOTES

- 1 Deuteronomy 10.19.
- 2 E.g., Exodus 22.21-7, Leviticus 25.35-8.
- 3 E.g., Amos 4.1, 5.24.
- 4 Jeremiah 22.13-6, Isaiah 1.11-7.
- 5 Mark 2.1-12, Luke 19.1-10, Luke 16.19-31.
- 6 Luke 10.25-37.
- 7 Matthew 25.40.
- 8 *On Being a Christian*, Collins, 1977, p.238. Ronald Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1978, was a pointer to this in recent conservative evangelical circles, whilst the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization (1974) included a commitment to a simpler lifestyle.
- 9 *God, Politics and the Future*, SCM, 1988, p.63.
- 10 The National Housing Forum includes such constituent bodies as the Association of County Councils, Institute of Housing, Royal Institute of British Architects. See *The Case for Housing*.
- 11 See *Social Trends*, 1985.
- 12 According to the 1981 census, Moss Side had 30% unemployment compared with 4% in the Manchester suburb of Bramhall.
- 13 See also *Inequalities in Health* (The Black Report), DHSS, 1980.
- 14 *District Trends*, 1984, published by Bradford Metropolitan District Council.
- 15 Quoted by David Jenkins, *op.cit.*, p.66.
- 16 Details of the various viewpoints can be found in many sources, including John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, Macmillan, 1973; Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, SPCK, 1978.
- 17 I Peter 3.15.
- 18 H. R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, Harper & Row, 1951, still holds much significance in this debate. See also *Faith in the City*, Church House Publishing, 1986, p.75.
- 19 See Raymond Bakke, *The Urban Christian*, Marc Europe, 1987.
- 20 See also National Housing Forum, *op.cit.*, p.4.
- 21 *A Tree God Planted*, Ethnic Minorities in Methodism, Working Group, 1985.
- 22 See Paul Weller, *Sanctuary - the beginning of a Movement?* Runnymede Trust, 1987.
- 23 For example, see *Racial Justice*, Evangelical Christians for Racial Justice, Winter 1987 issue. Also publications from B.C.C. Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths.
- 24 John 17.21 New Jerusalem Bible.
- 25 *Better Together*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1988, p.65.
- 26 E.g., the Manningham Project in Bradford, whose Management Committee includes members of statutory and voluntary bodies as well as churches.
- 27 On networking, see David Clark, *The Liberation of the Church*, National Centre for Christian Communities and Networks, 1984.
- 28 Privately circulated report. See also *Faith in the City*, p.119f.
- 29 See J. G. Davies, *Worship and Mission*, SCM, 1966.
- 30 See Michael Paget Wilkes, *Poverty, Revolution and the Church*, 1981, p.98.
- 31 John 12.24.

W. E. WHALLEY Tutor, Northern Baptist College, and formerly Minister, Central Bradford Baptist Fellowship