

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND CHRISTIAN MISSION

Where I'm coming from?

Urban mission context:

For the last twelve years I have been involved in urban mission mainly in East London. I see my calling as being a missionary one, as a member of the church of Jesus Christ called to be involved in holistic evangelisation of the inner city community. My current post with ECUM is a research and development job, aiming to resource other UPA Christians and churches for their work in urban mission.

Powerlessness and poverty

As an inner city resident and activist I am constantly confronted with the issues and casualties of urban deprivation. I see the evidence of an increasingly polarised society in the confrontation between Docklands YUPIs and Cockney Council tenants, in the racism which oppresses my black friends, in the new legislation on housing, poll tax and social (in)security. I see in the words and faces of my neighbours the cynicism that blames "them" for everything that goes wrong and the hopelessness that accepts with resignation that "there is nothing we can do about it."

An evangelical Biblical commitment

I come from working class evangelical Methodist roots which make me have a powerful gut reaction that sides with the underdog. There is something in my spirit that insists that piety without practice is empty hypocrisy, but works without faith can never put us right with God. As I continue to read the Bible I am more and more convinced that God thinks and feels the same way, and that he is already doing something to heal the whole created order.

A church which is rich and powerful

I am a member of a diverse and plural church, but one which even at the local level is rich and powerful in comparison with many local people. While there are some encouraging signs that the church is responding to the challenge of becoming a church for the poor, there is very little evidence to suggest that it will ever be a church of the poor. Even those groups which draw in the marginalised sectors of society, e.g. the Black led Pentecostals, show signs of being trapped on the escalator of social mobility which takes them away from their roots.

What is Community Work?

Community Work in the churches is a broad undefined term which covers a multitude of sins. In the British urban situation I detect four different if sometimes overlapping types of community work as outlined below.

community service (Samaritanism)

Most churches are to some extent aware of personal and pastoral needs of people in the community. They are also aware of the parable of the Good Samaritan and the "when I needed a neighbour" theology of Mt. 25. This sometimes leads them to set up projects which help specific groups such as Old peoples lunch clubs, soup runs for the homeless, youth clubs, English Classes for Asian ladies and good neighbour

schemes. Many church members get involved in such projects, and lots of others feel guilty that they only support them by the occasional prayer or gift. No-one in urban mission these days suggests such activities are irrelevant or pointless.

political campaigning (prophets)

In recent years certain sections of the church have become aware that a simple "band aid" approach does little to solve the underlying problems of injustice. Third World development issues such as aid v. trade have introduced such issues to many Christians. The Faith in the City report highlighted structural inequalities of housing, employment, education, health and order and law. The rediscovery of the prophetic tradition in Scripture has raised the legitimacy of churches campaigning on political issues, and on one such (Sunday Trading) there has been a remarkable consensus and success. Other issues in which Christians have vested interests have produced less certainty and more conflict. However, there is a growing agreement that Christians have a right and duty to be involved in such issues; the conflict comes because Christians end up taking opposite points of view.

professional community development

In the last thirty years a new profession of Community work has emerged complete with training courses, qualifications and recognised salary scales. Many churches in urban areas, who have small human and financial resources for mission have been able to get grants to employ community workers and have seen them to be an appropriate way of strengthening mission. Among the key values of community work have been the development of grass roots democratic control over decision making, the enabling of local groups to help themselves meet social needs, and a commitment to accepting people as they are while confronting attitudes and practices which discriminate on the grounds of race and sex. It is here that the church confronts a theological dilemma, for the ideology of community workers is usually phrased in terms of democratic (leftish) secular humanism. Although many of the resulting values and practices may be perfectly congruent with Biblical Christianity there are times when values of Christians and non-Christians conflict, and in some cases conscience may dictate that the church cannot condone what other community members want to do. These range from questions of allowing bingo on church premises, to whether the church should redecorate the hall using an MSC scheme which exploits young unemployed people on cheap wages.

a base church

Some of these dilemmas would be minimised if the urban church was more of a mass movement, more representative of people at the base of society. If this were the case, as it often is in Christian communities in the two thirds world, and as it evidently was in the urban churches of the NT, Christians would be more naturally involved in the struggles of everyday life. There would be less need to agonise over the professional role of the community worker and more openings for someone in the role of what the Latin Americans call a "pastoral accompanist", an enabling educator in the style of Paulo Freire, or for community organisers in the style of Saul Alinsky. There would be less sense from the church of doing good by community work and less of threat when conflicts arose. If we really were a base church the concerns of the people, of the Christian community, the community worker and of God himself would be one and the same.

In the UK some of the Black led Christian community projects exhibit the signs of originating from a base church and responding to the concerns of ordinary poor people in the black communities. Supplementary schools, training projects for unemployed youth, welfare projects for the elderly are now quite common. Their roots are in a distinct minority culture and experience of oppression. They operate with a theology which on the surface has been American influenced, fundamentalist and apolitical, while underneath reflecting a popular longing for liberation in this life. The result is a distinct ethos of community development from the bottom up, fired by charismatic leadership, and communicating the message that despite everything Black people can make it in white society. The way these initiatives and the theological thinking behind them develop will present a fascinating contrast and challenge to the community work of white led churches in future years.

What is mission?

Clearly if one of the aims and objectives of mission is the building up of a base community church a fundamental question is about how community work is integrated into our thinking and practice of holistic mission. In order to look at this issue it will be helpful to outline a number of possible positions which have been taken up by various mission thinkers.

Model 1 The Fundamentalist View.

This position sees the world as intrinsically evil and sold under sin until the time when Jesus returns at the last day. In the meantime evangelism is seen as a rescue mission. The task is to haul as many souls aboard the lifeboat of the church before they sink towards a lost eternity. Naturally this provides a strong motivation for verbal evangelism, but discipleship inevitably becomes reduced to individual pietism, and holiness to a minimal number of taboos. (To booze or not to booze, that is the question). In this schema social action, other than minimal pastoral care for converts is likely to be seen as a dangerous diversion from the true mission of the gospel. This view of mission obviously has nothing to say to the debate about Christian community work.

2) The Church Growth View.

In this way of thinking, popularised by Donald McGavran and others in the Church Growth movement the primary task of the mission is the making of disciples and the numerical expansion of the Christian church. There is a recognition of the legitimacy of social action as a secondary concern for the Bible tells us to do good to all people. There is however a tendency to see community work as bait for evangelistic "fishing". The church will gain credibility by its good works and build relationships which will be fruitful in making disciples. This view is now widely accepted in mainstream evangelical thinking, and much more widely by Christians of all persuasions who tend to judge the work of God and the success of a local church by simply counting the number of bottoms on pews in Sunday worship. This view relates quite well to the "community work as social service" approach and to some extent would see community work as a technique to help build a base church. However it would be very cautious about prophetic community involvement and face fundamental dilemmas about professional community development work.

3) Holistic Evangelism

A third position on mission is currently emerging from many different sectors of the worldwide church in resistance to the secularising tendencies that suggest that faith is a purely personal and private matter to be kept in the safety of a Sunday only slot. It is also being developed as Christians begin to read the Bible in the context of social and political struggles. In this view mission is broader than evangelism, for just as Jesus worked at many levels as preacher, healer, enabling educator and prophet so must the church, for "as the Father sent me so I send you". In this view evangelism is seen as an equal partner with social action, as the two blades of a pair of scissors. Perhaps it is better to avoid dualistic thinking to speak of a seamless garment of mission, comprising all that God is doing through his church to bring about his Kingdom rule on earth as it is in heaven.

There is room in this view to see God at work beyond the church, that there are agents of the Kingdom who would not own the name of Christ. However, there is still a distinction between agents and children of the Kingdom and it is for that reason that proponents of this view would actively proclaim the Good News and long for a response in terms of repentance and saving faith. In the context of community work Christians holding this view would find it quite natural and appropriate to be working in community development, regardless of whether it brought people into the worshipping group. They would also be willing to work alongside non-Christians in the community for the sake of justice and Shalom on specific issues, while trying to avoid being sucked in to non-Christian world views and lifestyles.

4) A Radical Secularised / Universalist View.

There is a fourth position to be found in some sectors of the Church, almost entirely among clergy and professional community workers who have abandoned some of the traditional orthodoxies. Here social action, and particularly community development and left wing political action is seen as indistinguishable from kingdom evangelism. The mission of God is seen as everything that God is doing in the world and there is often a despairing resignation that S/He is doing far more outside the churches than within them. There is therefore no meaningful distinction between Christians and non-Christians and thus personal evangelism and discipleship is of little relevance. Many of the key proponents of this view, which was very popular among the sixties radicals have now dropped out of the institutional church for secular social and community work, or have only stayed with the church because of a felt need for ritual and "spirituality". On the positive side some of the most creative examples of church based community development work have been initiated by people holding these views, probably because they have been freed from many of the traditional hang-ups which are faced by Christians working in the community.

In case it is not already clear the view with which I am most in sympathy is the third one of holistic evangelism. The fundamentalist view I reject as being profoundly unbiblical, while the second and fourth I see as worthy of consideration and in some respects helpful. I would certainly respect and commend many pieces of community work which have been initiated and continued on the basis of those views. Having nailed my colours to the mast I would now like to explore some of the theological pointers and tensions which arise in Christian Community development work.

Theological Pointers and Tensions?

creation mandate

The starting point for any human involvement in God's work must be in the doctrine of Creation. The world is made by God and belongs to God and human beings are set in it as stewards to care for and develop the resources of the earth. As they are made in the image of God they share in his sense of community, (expressed in the Trinity), in his creativity, in His sense of moral judgement, and equally in His provision for basic human needs.

Thus in community work terms everyone in our society has an equal claim to respect and dignity, to a just share in resources which are available, and potentially a contribution to make to the whole community. Therefore the christian community worker should work towards these ends, and be willing to work alongside all people on the basis of common humanity alone. Part of the task is to enable people see themselves as fully human and not as powerless and dependent on other people.

a fallen world

Since the beginning of human history we have been in rebellion against God and repeatedly fall short of his ideal standards of peace and justice.

Since all are sinners there is no place for pride, but there is a place for confronting evil and resisting it in every way in our community work. Yet in our fallen world we know that sin will always spoil our best efforts so there is no point expecting community development to solve all our problems. We must be realistic, not starry eyed about what can be achieved. Some community work is based on the assumption that all people are basically good. In Biblical terms this is simply rubbish.

OT Torah & prophets

The tradition of the Torah and the prophets is one in which society is to be ordered according to God's will. Shalom and justice are at the heart of God's plan for his people and the covenant promises are that all will be well in the land if they are obedient. The law of Moses with its emphasis on concern for the widows, orphans and aliens and in the provisions of the jubilee etc prevent the development of long term dependency. Rather the Torah is a charter for the building of community. In dependence on God the people can come to a measure of communal interdependence. It is social justice and mutual help, not Victorian self help and patronising charity that is the keynote of old testament law. The prophets were called to protest whenever the ideals of the Torah were ignored and the powerful trampled the poor into the dust.

In our community work we need to pursue Biblical standards of justice, in confrontation with the powers that be as necessary. We also need to assess our community work practice in the light of the Torah and see that our practice fosters and enables the kind of community which God desires.

incarnation and emptying

At the heart of the Christian faith is the message of God with us, the Lord of Glory who emptied himself and took the form of a servant, who although rich became poor for our sake.

We are called in Christian community work to follow the example of Jesus, not claiming our own rights (salaries, career structures?) but to take the role of servants. We need to be willing to wash feet and not refrain from costly involvement in people's lives and struggles. There is a real temptation for the full time professional community worker to avoid involvement, rationalising it as outside one's job description, as encouraging dependency or being "mere first aid" which delays the fundamental changes needed. It is here we need the wisdom of God not just the ideology of community work.

The kingdom of God

A central theme of the Gospels is the Good News that the Kingdom rule of God is bursting into the present age in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The blind receive sight, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the poor hear the Good news and the jubilee is proclaimed. The rule of God has arrived but is not yet here in its fullness. In the present age only the children of the Kingdom acknowledge the King and respond in obedience to His rule in their lives. They receive a foretaste of the heavenly banquet prepared for all God's people. In the age to come every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

In community work there is a challenge to us to work in Kingdom ways, in the hope of bringing further areas under the rule of Christ. But we should not be utopian in our expectations for only God will bring in the fullness of the Kingdom. Nor should we be insistent that everyone is compelled to share Christian values, for Christ only desires willing servants. For those who are outside the kingdom there is some evidence of good through common grace, but when there is enmity to the Kingdom there is a role for law as a restraint on evil.

the parables of the kingdom bring us insight on our community work: e.g. Mustard Seed, Sower, Talents. However we must be careful about how to interpret them, a "snap" connection or an ideologically inspired reading may obscure what Jesus was actually saying.

the church as model community

The NT church was a "koinonia" in which mutual interdependence and the breaking down of barriers was the norm. The collective nature of the church went far beyond a gathering for weekly worship. In Christ there was neither male nor female, Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free. There was no one in need for everyone shared their possessions and gave generous hospitality. There was space to exercise the widest diversity of spiritual gifts as in the body as a whole the church was given all the skills, talents and interests which were necessary. There was of course a structure of leadership in the early church but the recognised leaders were to operate with a servant ethos, not as tyrannical overlords. There were many times when they needed to lead by enabling and persuasion and few when commands were necessary.

Thus the structure of the early church gives insight into the way a community development worker should operate. There is an argument that such a style can never work in the "world" but is only of use in a redeemed spirit filled society. One look at the early church will show that it was still nothing more than a group of sinners, often

backsliding and failing to meet its ideals. The conclusion is that if we believe a method of dealing with people is of God, we should not abandon it simply because people fail to respond.

holiness and alliances

There is a problem about community involvement for many Christians because they have been taught to separate themselves from the world and live a holy life. There are many counter arguments. The fact that in the incarnation God got involved, got his hands dirty and lived among us without sin is the greatest incentive. The argument that it is impossible to live and move and have our being in the world without being confronted by sin is a practical one. Even in a hermitage there are temptations. Thirdly most "holiness" as understood by Christians is "trivial holiness". What is needed if Christians are to make a difference to society, and to give a clear witness to the Gospel is a radical holiness, a holy nationhood to use Alan Kreider's phrase, a communal lifestyle which challenges the idolatries of present day society.

There is an argument also that Christians should "not be unequally yoked with unbelievers". Clearly they cannot be in worship or evangelism. But where Non-Christians share basic value positions with us on such issues as racism or housing rights then surely coalitions are possible. The OT has many examples of working with pagan systems and rulers (e.g. Joseph, Daniel Nehemiah) alongside warnings against unholy foreign alliances. Even in the NT the Roman empire portrayed as the idolatrous beast of Revelation is still recognised as having a God given ministry of maintaining justice in Romans 13. The church must not compromise with the state, yet is to give limited obedience and accept benefits and blessings in return. There are clear implications here on the question of funding and control of Christian community projects. What Christians in community action need is discernment not isolationism.

the spirit and work of God

The Holy Spirit is usually seen as a gift bestowed on the people of God for the purpose of building up the church. However there is also a Biblical theme of the Spirit as an independent person of the Godhead working where he wills, (blowing where he listeth). In the OT the anointing of the Spirit comes upon some unlikely people including Balaam and Cyrus. God is sovereign and therefore can work out in the world with or without human or Christian agency.

Our task in community work therefore becomes one of discernment. We need to be open to what is happening in the community, finding out where there are signs of the Kingdom in people and groups of other faiths and none, and being willing to affirm and encourage them in the positive aspects of their work. Surely it would be right for example for a Christian community worker to help a Muslim or Hindu group to set up and run an advice centre for families divided by the current unjust immigration laws. And if there are moments when Christian values can be made explicit why not take them, if the occasions do not come the hidden yeast is still working away.

spiritual battle : Christus Victor

The NT is very clear that Christians are engaged in a cosmic spiritual battle in which we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against powers and principalities. The weapons to be used are spiritual ones of prayer and faith, justice and peace and the word of God. Above all the NT writers are convinced that through the Cross Jesus has already

won the ultimate victory and led the powers and principalities of evil into slavery. Christians living in the midst of urban deprivation, and under the rule of oppressive political systems have been forced to recognise the spiritual powers of evil. The demonic is deeply engrained in our culture and social structures, it pervades our bureaucratic and political systems with selfishness, vested interests, corruption, petty conflicts, marginalisation of the poor and institutional racism. Against such evil we must stand firm in the name of Christ proclaiming Jesus is Lord, that good eventually will triumph, in fact that God has already won.

There is a message of hope there in the midst of the struggles of powerless local communities against the powers and principalities of big business and the state. While Satan strives to bring division and violence, injustice and oppression, squalour and human misery by our work in building community, standing up for justice, and working for human dignity and welfare are engaged in battle in the name of Christ. We must refuse to let the status quo dominate and shape our lives when there is a better way to be strived for. When power is taken from Satan and his agents and given to responsible loving human beings there is a victory for God. Our struggles are one more step towards the reconciling of all things under the rule of Christ. They have implications not only in this present material world but in the spiritual and heavenly realms. Because there is a continuity between the present age and the age to come they can in short be of eternal significance.

suffering and judgement

There will also be times of failure and despair in our community work, times when we are called to bear the cross. Our projects and schemes will fail, people will let us down and we will not always achieve our goals, and we will be broken as we see the effects of poverty and oppression. Such suffering should not surprise us for it was inevitable too for Jesus. It is then that solidarity and sympathy with others and in Him will become the key note of our lives, and we will enter the fellowship of his sufferings, waiting until God knows when to experience the power of his resurrection.

There will be times too when we come under judgement, when we face "crisis" and our lives, our work, the communities in which we live need to be confronted by God and his justice. God calls all people including us to account. There will be Amos's plumb line hanging over us testing if our building is straight enough to stand. There will be a testing by fire in which buildings made of straw will be consumed, and precious metal refined.

Specific Bible passages with community development themes:

There are also a number of specific Bible passages which seem to indicate that community development strategies are no new thing. Exodus 17 shows how Moses was persuaded to delegate responsibility in an enabling way. Nehemiah is a key text for urban renewal and Chapter 3 in particular shows how a community project can be organised on participatory lines. The apprenticeship training programme which Jesus gives the disciples is a model of appropriate education for grass roots leaders in the community. There are plenty of other treasures which will have relevance to specific situations where Christians are involved.

What should we do?

What then are the implications in terms of developing a Christian understanding and practice of community work?

1) Action Reflection Theology

There is clearly a need for further thinking about the theology of community work and its application to specific communities and projects. What I have written is largely a personal but systematic and Biblical framework for theological thinking. In practice things are not half so tidy. There needs to be group interaction in theologising, there needs to be earthing in specific stories, there needs to be grappling with specific Bible passages. There will be disagreements and debates, probably a fair number of emerging heresies before there is consensus, hopefully around the truth.

The way forward is to set up small working groups for each church based community project whose aim is reflection and Bible study. Laurie Green in "Power to the Powerless" describes how one such group worked. They need to be composed mainly of ordinary people, local church members, volunteers and users of the project with one or two at the most professionals as facilitator / biblical consultant. It doesn't need doctors of theology and references to Bonhoeffer and Bultmann, simply an openness to each other, to the community and to the Word of God. It does perhaps need someone with skills and insight in social and political analysis, since people's interpretation of what is going on around them is so biased and ideologically conditioned. There is no point trying to do theology of community work if you get your mind filled by reading the Sun.

So get on your hermeneutical cycles and become peddlers of the Gospel!

2) Towards a Base Church

One of the key problems of the church which engages in community work is that it starts from a distorted understanding of itself. The church is usually seen as institutional rather than organic. It is a building and an organisation rather than the body of Christ and the people of God. It is rich and powerful in the nation, but small and overstretched in the neighbourhood. It thinks it has something to give but the only way it can think of doing it is by employing a full time community worker. Thus arise the problems of charity which is selective and patronising, of the dependency of the church on the funding agency and of the project on the worker, the professionalism which is ultimately disabling, and the conflict between congregation and community which is sharpened because the project fails to recruit new church members.

The way forward must be to give priority to the development and growth of a base church. This means a commitment to evangelisation and discipleship training, and to building a church which itself is participatory, enabling and accepting and where the boundaries between "us" and "them" are known to God alone. It means striving for a Christian community where there is a radically different but totally incarnational Christian lifestyle, an spirit of servanthood, and a commitment to live by and work for God's kingdom of justice and peace. It must be a worshipping, prayerful Christ centred church, open to the work of the Holy Spirit both within and outside.

3) Towards Building a Just Community

Justice and judgement begin with the household of God so we must begin

with a critical self examination. Where we fail to live up to the values of the Gospel we need to turn in confession and repentance of individual and corporate sin. In engaging in community work in our neighbourhoods, or in wider society, we need four things. Firstly we need analysis, both sociological and political so that we can discover why things are as they are and how they might be changed. Then we need our emotions as we respond to people in their hurting situations, feelings which are tuned in to God's own heart. Thirdly we need vision, a vision for how things might be in an ideal world, and clarity of vision so that we can set realistic, measurable and achievable goals for our community work. Finally we need a Godly boldness that will enable us to work hard without reward, to fight the battles and perservere to the end.

This chapter is the result of discussions with colleagues in the ECUM network and in particular of a group consisting of Andrew Kirk, Judith Gardiner, Helen Yocum, Dave Berry etc.... plus correspondence with Mike Wilson and talks with Phill Vickery, Fran Beckett and others. John Walton and the network associated with the BCC's Community work unit have ever been in the background encouraging and bouncing ideas around. Nonetheless I take personal responsibility for all the views expressed which may not necessarily be shared by any of the people mentioned or by my employers, the Evangelical Coalition for Urban Mission.

#