

REASSEMBLING THE URBAN CHURCH

Greg Smith... December 2012 (Draft1)

The dictionary definition of the Greek word *ekklesia* (which we translate as “church”, the French as *eglise*, the Welsh as *Eglwys*) is a [gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place, an assembly](#) .

Many people think the institutional church in the 21st Century is in the process of disintegrating – this paper is an attempt to explore if there are countervailing processes at work, and whether it is possible to reassemble the church in contemporary urban society. The argument concentrates on the church in the UK, perhaps more specifically on England, and on the local urban priority area settings in which the author has worked for many years, though one cannot ignore the impact of globalisation, in population movements, economic flows and electronic communication, and what [Castells \(1989\)](#) has called the “[space of flows](#)”.

The Church

I take it for granted as someone formed by Methodism that as Mr. Wesley, said [“there is no such thing as a solitary Christian”](#). Christian life is life in community, in the fellowship of the Spirit we call the church. Thus it is inevitable that the church will have some form of institutional existence and life, even on the minimalist definition of an institution as “some people and some rules”. But I am in agreement with [Popper](#) that it is dangerous to give social and institutional arrangements some permanence because those arrangements will always turn out to be inadequate in the longer term .

What then of the state of the church in Britain today? There is little doubt about the numerical [decline in church attendance](#) among the major denominations over the last half century, the loss of the monopoly position of Christianity or the increasing numbers of people who claim to be of “no religion, especially among younger people. Statistics are regularly contested for example on the blog of BRIN the [British Religion in Numbers Archive](#) and scholars continue to debate the secularisation thesis with views ranging from the hard-line [Bruce \(2002\)](#), to the more nuanced [Martin 2011](#), [Davie 1994 & 2002](#) or [Chambers 2005](#) . The most recent comprehensive overview based on the research of the AHRC / [ESRC Religion and Society Programme](#) is the collection [“Religion and Change in Modern Britain” eds. Woodhead & Catto 2012](#). There are also debates around the concept of the *postsecular* e.g. [Beckford 2012](#) , and our own contributions [Beaumont & Baker eds \(2012\)](#), [Smith \(unpublished\)](#), which are relevant but cannot be considered here for reasons of space.

Yet despite the overall trends and the methodological problems of measuring religious vitality by church attendance, there are signs that in certain sectors churches are persisting, thriving and even growing. Some case studies are collected in [Goodhew 2012](#). It is clear for example that ethnic diversity has led to church growth especially in inner London, in the Church of England and the Roman Catholic church as well as among evangelicals and Pentecostals. Some such churches have grown huge congregations large enough to be described as “mega-churches” e.g. [Kingsway International Christian Centre](#). Here at least there is a thriving religious market with a diverse supply of products to satisfy the religious needs of every niche of spiritual consumer in the super-diversity of the metropolis. Across the country it can be argued that the main denominations are in crisis while the evangelical/charismatic is now the mainstream for congregational life. There is evidently a resonance for current generations raised in an ethos of cultural consumption and individual choice – various genres of popular Christian music, person centred spirituality, ministry that addresses immediate felt needs, and in some cases promises of material as well as spiritual blessing at relatively small cost. Non-Christian spiritualities and therapies also compete in this market as do other Christian traditions. There are numerous strong and growing reformed biblical churches and lively Anglo-Catholic exceptions especially in Cathedrals who offer aesthetically beautiful worship, without perhaps a radical call to conversion and discipleship.

However, it does seem that the further one moves from core to periphery, the less well the market is saturated with attractive options. As a participant observer in church life in semi urban Lancashire one is struck by the conservative traditionalism of the main-stream denominations, the widespread acceptance of the narrative of inevitable church decline, the increasingly geriatric composition of congregations and the improbability of a financial or institutional sustainability. In my own city of Preston for example, in the last few years numerous congregations and their associated church buildings have closed of all the major traditions, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist and URC. In other cases parishes have been merged or clergy posts withdrawn. Furthermore several of the new independent charismatic and evangelical fellowships have emerged, flourished for a season then declined or fragmented and disappeared.

One factor remains hardly changed over the last hundred years. In urban and semi urban settings in the UK white working (and non-working) class adults, especially men, remain grossly unrepresented in church congregations. Traditionally it was assumed they would be found in the pub rather than the chapel or church, but as local pubs close almost more frequently than churches this is no longer the case. Arguably sport has fulfilled the function of religion in this “blokeish” culture, while church has been largely the milieu of

women, children and (perceived as effeminate) middle class men. It's possible that Catholicism and Pentecostalism were a tad more effective at retaining men in their churches, Concern about this emerged as early as 1957 in [Wickham's Church and People in an Industrial City, Lutterworth Press, London](#) and in the emergence of [industrial mission](#). [Built as a City \(Sheppard 1975\)](#) developed this analysis but in general the concerns and methods of the [David Sheppard](#) generation of urban evangelicals consolidated into the approach of [Unlock](#) have either been found wanting, or more likely not properly tried and applied, with the result that most social housing estates are regarded as [Unreached \(Chester 2012\)](#) and possibly unreachable for the gospel.

Nevertheless, here and there across the country new shoots of Christian life are emerging. Statistics have started to capture evidence about the movement known as [Fresh Expressions](#). At least a [couple of thousand have been documented in the main-stream denominations](#) . They include simple family friendly approaches such as [Messy Church](#) to movements inspired by ancient tradition such as [new monasticism](#), and some that have emerged in [inner city settings](#). Perhaps most interesting for discipleship and mission in deprived urban areas are the intentional missional communities that seek to become incarnate in local neighbourhoods, working where possible alongside existing churches, or perhaps planting completely new congregations. Described by some as "[submerging church](#)" the best know examples are the [Eden Network](#), the Baptist [Urban Expression](#) movement and the [Reaching the Unreached](#) network, although there are more established religious orders in the catholic tradition who have renewed examples of such missional presence. Whether these movements will succeed in bringing urban people to faith in Jesus and gathering them together in new local congregations on a large scale remains to be seen.

Despite the weakness of Christian institutions in the urban setting there is still a residual presence and power base of the established institutionalised churches. The Church of England at the national level is still established and the official chaplaincy to the state and nation and has a parish presence in every neighbourhood. She is still represented by 26 bishops sitting in parliament – though after the [recent vote in General Synod](#) is likely to struggle to retain that place if perceived as a non democratic body which discriminates against over half of the population. In the national media religion still has a voice and a protected status through BBC programmes such as [Thought for the Day](#) and [Songs of Praise](#). More locally church schools remain extremely popular with parents, chaplaincies are supported (with some questions about inclusivity) in prisons, the forces, education and the NHS. In the field of local government there are many partnerships and governance bodies where faith communities are positively welcome and play an active role ([Evangelical Alliance report – forthcoming](#)). In short the

traditional institutional church is struggling, but not yet dead. The challenge is to reassemble the institution in a way that will be more relevant to the contemporary urban context. And it is to that context that we now turn.

The Context – a PEST analysis

Political : Contemporary urban society seems to exhibit a trust deficit – a general distrust of the other marked by an ever pervasive state surveillance system involving CCTV cameras, retention of documentation in massive databases, and the monitoring of professional activity by performance management techniques. There is a popular distrust of authority focused particularly in distrust of politicians, greatest when measured by voting turnout in areas of urban deprivation. Distrust extends to church leaders, especially after recent scandals over sex abuse by priests. [In a 2012 survey of evangelical Christians](#) 87% believed the “unattractive public image of the Church and its leaders” was a factor that hindered evangelism (and 33% said it was a very important factor), compared to those citing the attacks of secularists such as Dawkins at 51% (8% very important). Many Christians lack trust in the institutional church and its leaders yet, unlike the general public, they believe in and engage in democratic politics. [Another survey of the same evangelical constituency](#) found that 91% said they were going to vote in the referendum on the alternative vote. Christians, especially those of the older generation, vote (for all the different parties in patterns not dissimilar from the wider electorate) and lobby excessively on a wide range of issues (see [The political concerns of evangelical Christians in the UK - presentation given at the British Sociological Association Sociology of Religion conference \(March 2012\)](#)) Yet increasingly political ideology is rendered irrelevant as all parties tend to fight for swing voters over the centre ground, prioritising economic growth and populist issues. There are no electorally realistic radical alternatives to global capitalism, and the promise of low taxation and adequate social services for hard working families.

Economics – The bankruptcy of political institutions is correlated with the bankruptcy (monetary and moral) of the financial institutions. For the majority of citizens the good times are over, while inequality (with all its sad consequences documented in [Wilkinson & Pickett 2009](#).) continues to grow. The poor in the UK face a growing burden as welfare reform, growing unemployment and low paid precarious work take their toll. This is a consequence of three decades or more of the neo-liberal experiment with the global economy and though organisations such as [Church Action on Poverty](#) have campaigned throughout that period they have met little real success at the national level. It will be many years before shared prosperity in the UK returns to earlier levels, and some doubt if it ever can do so, given the shift in

global resources and production to the emerging economies of Asia and other regions of the developing world. There is a widespread Christian discontent with consumerism, trade injustice and growing inequality and poverty. Some voices in the church appeared to be fellow travelling with the [Occupy movement in 2011](#), but the encampment outside St Paul's and the divided response of the church was a poor advertisement for Christianity, and led to few alternative proposals that stood much chance of being accepted by governments in a way which might bring structural change. In economics the church is left with a consensus in support of the fair trade movement, a few ethical business experiments led by Christian social entrepreneurs and some new concern with the agenda that well being or human flourishing must be seen as more than wealth.

Social – In the 1980s the doctrine of individualism was captured in Thatcher's well known phrase, "[there is no such thing as society](#)." Economic and political realities mean that we continue to live with that legacy, though the emergence of some discontent and the emergence of [communitarian](#) thinking and the discourse of "[social capital](#)" leading down to current "[red tory](#)" and "[blue labour](#)" thinking and Cameron's endorsement of "[the big society](#)" has recognized its inadequacies. However there is hardly enough resistance to amount to a cultural rejection of the doctrine of the autonomous individual. But even government policy now recognizes that faith produces reservoirs of social capital – bonding within local congregations that enhances personal wellbeing, bridging forms which have potential for community cohesion and vertical linking forms which have potential for the mobilisation of economic resources and power relationships. Nevertheless, the breakdown of traditional forms of community based as they were on kinship and communities of labour in Fordist industrial production has transformed the nature of solidarity.

In urban settings with increased ethnic and religious diversity, and with emerging awareness of gender and sexuality we live in an age of identity politics. Identities are socially and sometimes personally constructed and negotiated leading to multiple personae and forms of hybridity ([See Baker 2007 for application of this to urban church life.](#)). Networking becomes all important and thin webs of relationships are likely to develop. There is [strength in weak ties](#) and less chance of long term loyalty to traditional bonds of kinship, neighbourhood and local congregation. The limit to this is only found because of the physical embodiment of the human person and the impossibility of being in more than one place at the same time, despite all our frantic mobility.

Technological. We live at a time when rapid and unprecedented developments in technology have a profound impact not only on human

experience but on the global and local environment. Interpretations of the scientific evidence are disputed though there is growing consensus that human activity is contributing to rapid climate change which is likely to lead to growing environmental chaos, the mass extinction of species and potentially a threat to human civilisation as we know it and even some risk to the survival of our own species. At the more local level both urban and rural environments become polluted and the demand for personal travel (mostly using the private car) leads to frustration and congestion. In response it seems the majority of good Christians are mildly green in their attitudes and politics, a few have become eco activists, some have adjusted their lifestyles in the hope of making a difference by turning down the heating and riding their bikes, and some local churches are designating themselves as [eco-congregations](#). However, it does not appear that the church as a whole is giving this profoundly disturbing issue the theological or practical attention that it deserves.

The second key technological development has been electronic communication and the emergence of the web of communication via the internet. This has multiple impacts on social life ranging from employment tasks constantly chasing people in a 24/7 frenzy, to reducing face to face interaction as people constantly relate to their private world of screens and headphones and the promotion of personalised communities of weak ties and thin networks with a global footprint. There is also potential for rapid social mobilisation via online social networking. Some urban churches already use this well, for example in mobilising Christians and others in neighbourhood clear ups after the frenzy of [looting in many English cities in August 2011](#). However in churches where some members who on account of age, education or poverty are digitally excluded the new media can become a barrier as well as a channel of communication. A further impact of the new technology is that many more people can claim a place as producers rather than mere passive consumers of information and entertainment as the age of centralised broadcasting to the masses mutates into a more democratic mode of cultural co-production. Churches often try to build on this by digitising messages and music for electronic distribution, although in reality they are involved in narrowcasting rather than broadcasting. And for the time being at least it is still the corporate media and their world view that maintains control over public narratives.

Contested Areas and Coalitions of the Willing

What then are the prospects for reassembling the urban church in the ecclesiastical and social context in contemporary cities?

In the first instance we need to note hindrances and divisive factors that militate against a new broader ecumenism which has been encapsulated in

the notion of “[post-secular rapprochement](#)”, emphasizing broad coalitions of diverse actors striving for social justice *irrespective of social identity, value, and emotional or affective disposition*.

First of all, there is a long Christian tradition of defining the “other” by boundary maintenance processes. Historical examples include the controversies over the creeds and the doctrine of the Trinity, the Reformation and Counter Reformation, the 18th Century Methodist revival and the polarisation between fundamentalism and the modernist “social gospel” in the 20th Century. Some of these continue to be replayed in the church today. In the evangelical churches there are not always gracious disagreements which turn into tribal battles between [neo Calvinists](#) and [charismatics](#) (See <http://www.scionofzion.com/18dangers.htm> for an example of the tone of this controversy), and partially overlapping ones between conservatives ([Piper](#)) and open or “emergent” theologians ([Rob Bell](#), [Brian McLaren](#)). But in the mainstream denominations conflict has focussed on issues of gender and sexuality and [Giles Fraser](#) may be correct that polite disagreement in public debate papers over bitter tribal animosity between factions in the church. None of this is good public relations in a media saturated age, or helpful to mission in the name of one who prayed that *all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.* (John 17:21).

Despite these divisions there are some contemporary examples of new institutional forms of urban Christian activity which can be described as a reassembling of the church. Here we will mention only three.

Firstly there are new signs of a growing acceptance of pluralism in the church, and a willingness to work together across denominational and theological boundaries for the sake of the Kingdom of God. At the national level Hope 08 now established for the long term as [Hope Together](#) has drawn Christians together to work on mission activities in local communities. In many towns and cities there is a renewed fresh form of ecumenism that gives the wider church a voice and influence in the public sphere as well as opportunities to pray, worship and serve together. The [Gather movement](#) and conference in February 2012 brought many of these together and has documented them on the web. In [Preston I myself have been involved in one such network and written about it](#) as it flourished in a remarkable way during the recent Guild year. These movements are not without their own problems from time to time, as certain sections of the church remain apart from them, and there are dilemmas about their relationship with multi-faith and interfaith movements, which in an age where equalities legislation is in place will be favoured as a mechanism of public policy.

Secondly community organizing on the [Alinsky](#) model is a significant

phenomenon bringing congregations, other faith and community organisations together for political action in a number of British Cities. The most developed [London Citizens](#) has been well known for its successful campaigning for a living wage, The model through [Citizens UK](#) seeks to replicate itself in other urban areas with little evidence to date of sustainability. In many ways it can be seen as an attempt to reassemble the church, and the major denominations have played a significant role in the start up process. However, the movement appears mainly pragmatic and political, and while there are clear value positions that resonate with those of Christian faith, it is not so clear that it is underpinned by serious theology or by a depth of spirituality and prayer.

Thirdly the current context is one where the church, with evangelicalism in the forefront is developing widespread programmes of charitable social action. Since the first [Lausanne conference in 1974](#) evangelicals have rediscovered the concept of holistic mission and the social activist tradition that was a key factor of Methodist and subsequent revivalism. Organisations offering franchise operations to churches wishing to serve their communities have flourished. The most well known are the [Trussell Trust](#) with its food banks, [Christians Against Poverty](#) with its money management courses and debt counselling, [Redeeming Our Communities](#) with its Youth Cafe projects and [Street Pastors](#) with its late night teams patrolling city centres and UPA neighbourhoods. All of these have an evangelical ethos and would say they are not ashamed of the gospel, but operate on the principle that actions often speak louder than words. In many places they assemble teams drawn from a wide range of congregations and denominations. For example in recent commissioning service for Street Pastors in Preston over 65 trained volunteers drawn from over 30 churches came together to worship in the context of a city centre night club. The [Church Urban Fund](#) has developed a strategy to develop ecumenical co-operation in tackling poverty together at the diocesan level. In several areas formal partnerships in the first place between Anglicans and Methodists have been established as [Joint Ventures](#) but offering a “generous table” for the widest range of churches, In Birmingham this has led to a weekly rota of churches providing a night shelter for the homeless, in Preston a food bank delivered by the Salvation Army is supported by donations from most of the churches, and from community and faith groups including local mosques.

The context of austerity and welfare reform means the need for such collaborative mission is likely to increase and that social action projects will largely need to operate without grant funding support from the national and local state. But they will be a locus for a reassembling of the urban church, with a renewal of its ancient function as an important provider of welfare and solidarity with the poor. Congregations will no doubt continue to have a life and a role as centres for the ministry of word and sacrament, for the weekly

rituals of worship and liturgy. Small groups (usually linked with a congregation) will remain as a focus for bonding, study and prayer. Thin networks of special interest groups, and intentional missional communities will have a significant roll. But the institutions of church will have no choice but to change if we want to see

1. a credible visible church with something like an intellectually coherent Christian world view that can hold up its head with integrity in the public sphere
2. a missional church that increases in numbers, becomes sustainable and influential in all sectors of public life
3. a strong Christian contribution to the formation of a more just, equal, compassionate connected social order..

A research agenda emerges from this account of contemporary urban church life if we are to establish empirically the contours of these institutional transformations. Key questions to look at will include:

- In what situations are congregations declining, sustaining themselves, growing, or emerging afresh? How does this relate to local social, economic and cultural contexts, and to intentional missional activities?
- How do networks involving Christians from different traditions and congregations emerge and develop? What are the roles of online social networking and of church leaders and other animateurs in this process? Under what conditions do informal networks become consolidated into new institutions and organisations?
- In the face of economic hardship and the cuts in welfare how do Christians mobilise resources to provide help? How do they perceive what they are doing in terms of charity, mission and stewardship of resources? Do they distinguish between the deserving and undeserving poor and how do they ration their charitable work?
- Is there a shared theological understanding of the role of the church in the urban context and of mission among the urban poor in the UK? What is the relationship between spirituality, charity, mission, empowerment and prophetic engagement with the powers that be?