

REVIEW ARTICLE: Greg Smith 2000 words

Trends in Evangelical Urban Mission:
The last 10 Years:

Ladbrokees holiday camp at Caister on Sea was a funny place to hold a conference, sorry "Celebration" of evangelical Anglicans. They had closed the bars and the betting shops, so you couldn't even have a flutter on the race to be next Archbishop of Canterbury. But Oxford accented whispers among the thousands of off duty vicars, all identically clad in Arran sweaters and green waxed rain jackets, were discussing the odds. York was too old, Liverpool and Durham both too political to get away from the Downing Street starting stalls,... suddenly there was a rush of money on Chester, the going would suit this "man of prayer" according to the "Sporting Life". But as for the fillies.. none of them would be allowed to run.

And where was urban mission in NEAC 88? Out of 3000 or so people in the big top only a couple of hundred stood up claiming to live in UPAs. More than half of these were obviously professional Christians. Black faces and Scouse accents were predictably thin on the ground. Forty people participated in the "Taking on Faith in the City" workshop, scuppered from the start by a printer's error which had inserted an "l" in the first word of the title. True there were many other workshops relevant to urban mission. True the mainstage lectures were inspiring Biblical reflections on the God of justice and compassion, on the need for wholistic ministry. There were encouraging spontaneous rounds of applause as the iniquities of the Poll Tax, of Social Security cuts and of the Botha government were denounced with prophetic fervour.

Yet it was only on the fringe that the genuine voice of the urban Christians was to be heard. "Revival in the Inner City" was the optimistic title of the workshop. A dozen ordinary Christians, from four Birmingham parishes, black white and Asian, each briefly telling their stories. Testimonies, struggles, parish projects, a visit from Desmond Tutu, interspersed with chorus singing and spontaneous prayer. While the institutional church debates politics and prophecy, while the suburban parishes and Church Commissioners are obsessed with projects and the Urban Fund, God is at work on the margins in the people and processes of urban life. Do we need a specifically urban celebration to affirm the saints in the city, to bring urban mission in from the fringe?

NEAC seems to happen once a decade, so is a good opportunity to look back on the journey so far. Books and conferences only tell a fraction of the story but they do serve as waymarks and enable us to identify a movement developing. David Sheppard's "Built as a City" published in 1975 was the first book to take the urban agenda seriously in the UK. It was certainly the first book on urban mission that I and many of my contemporaries read. It set the scene for a gathering of an Urban Caucus Group at the Nottingham NEAC of 1977. Michael Eastman often retells the story of how so many urban evangelical ministers discovered each other there, and how this enabled urban issues to

surface. The formation of this and other networks eventually led to the birth of ECUM in 1980. Significantly the launching conference in April 1981 took place on the same day as the first major street disturbances in Brixton. ECUM's conference that day was in Birmingham. Should we claim that as an alibi, or recognise that as usual the church lives in the same age as the world, but is usually in the wrong place?

Meanwhile the international face of evangelicalism was changing. The 1974 Lausanne conference legitimised the role of Christians in social action. The follow up conference in Pattaya in 1981 saw the emergence of a radical group committed to Biblically based social justice and solidarity with the urban poor. Jim Funton steered the working party that produced the LCWE pamphlet on ministry among the urban poor, which contains one of the best summaries ever produced of the Biblical material on poverty. Ray Bakke was convenor of the group on mission to large cities and was launched on his career as international urban consultant. After Pattaya came Wheaton 1983. The papers from this conference are of great significance for the theology and practice of social transformation, in the two thirds world, and in urban Britain. They have just been published as "The Church in Response to Human Need" edited by Chris Sugden and Vinay Samuel (Regnum Books). Out of the same stable comes the international journal "Transformation" and the international network focussed on the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies. Base communities, theologies of liberation, stories from the underside were now being discussed by evangelicals. Waldron Scott's "Bring Forth Justice" (Eerdmans/ Marshalls 1982) reflected the new face of evangelicalism, seeking to integrate the Biblical material on mission, discipleship and social justice.

In the UK the early 80s saw a range of contributions to thinking on urban mission. City Cries was launched and ECUM day conferences in London attracted large audiences. "Urban Harvest" by Roy Joslin (Evangelical Press 1982) was the first sign of interest from the Reformed branch of the evangelical world. "Bias to The Poor" (Hodder 1983) was the product of David Sheppard's sabbatical and generated much interest in ecumenical and public arenas. At the radical end of the church John Vincent and the Urban Theology Unit had been using the bible alongside stories from the urban world and church. "Into the City" (Epworth 1982) is a very useful volume about urban ministry in Sheffield. For the Anglican's Mike Paget Wilkes "Poverty Revolution & The Church" (Paternoster 1982) raised some very hard questions about the complicity of the Church of England in establishment structures which oppress the urban poor. John Harvey's "Bridging the Gap" (St. Andrews Press 1987) covered similar issues for the Scottish church.

For evangelicals only the Bible can speak convincingly enough to cause a change of attitudes and behaviour. Four of the most important works have come not from Biblical theologians in the colleges but from urban activists who have reflected in context. Roger Dowley's "Towards the Recovery of a Lost Bequest" (ECUM 1983) is subtitled "a layman's work notes on the Biblical pattern for a just community". Each page contains enough Biblical material to inspire a sermon and to move the

sensitive and socially aware Christian to repentance and action. "New Humanity" by Sue Conlan & Morris Hobbs (ECRJ 1984) takes the Biblical material on race and justice and sets it against the painful history of British racism. Alan Kreider's "Journey Towards Holiness" (Marshalls 1986) develops the Biblical theme of holy nationhood, with application to church and community living, the peace movement and urban justice. All of this Biblical study owes much to the ministry of Jim Punton. Jim wrote little before he died in 1986 but his central message of shalom inspired hundreds. Colin Marchant's new book "Shalom my Friend" (Marshalls 1987) has drawn together much of this material and added more. Shalom has become the catch phrase for Colin's year as president of the Baptist Union.

As the 80's progressed the poverty and powerlessness in the urban world increased. While government policies damaged the Shalom of our cities, and the opposition was ineffective and fragmented, the Church of England rushed to defend the urban poor. The Archbishop's Commission on Urban Priority Areas which published their "Faith in the City" report in 1985 was an excellent exercise in data gathering and listening to urban people. It made enough impact to be rubbished as "naive marxism" by government spokespeople, and to move the General Synod to set up a multi-million pound urban fund. But as the recommendations to government are largely ignored, and those to the church meet varying degrees of institutional resistance, it is hard to believe that the decline of mainline churches will be reversed, or that justice will be done in the UPAs.

Following "Faith in the City" came a wave of publishing, each book majoring on a key problem or experience in urban mission. Colin Marchant's "Signs in the City" (Hodder 1985) was an introductory summary of what was happening in the churches of the East End. Dave Cave's "Jesus is Your Best Mate" (Marshalls 1985) focussed on methods of evangelism in white working class culture. Pip Wilson's "Gutter Feelings" (Marshalls 1985) spoke of the struggles involved in urban youth work. "Making Unemployment Work" by Michael Moynagh (Lion 1985) tackled the great socioeconomic problem of the decade from a Biblical perspective. "Belief in a Mixed Society" by Christopher Lamb (Lion 1985) raises the issues of Christian living in a plural multifaith community. Ahern & Davie's "Inner City God" (Hodder & Stoughton 1987) is a more academic sociological work attempting to grapple with the nature of belief in the unchurched urban masses. Laurie Green's "Power to the Powerless" (Marshalls 1987) concentrates on action reflection theology as done by grass roots Christians in Birmingham and raises key questions about training for ministry.

The multifaceted nature of urban ministry demands some attempt at integrating theology, social studies and mission practice. The best attempt so far comes in Ray Bakke's "The Urban Christian" (Marc Europe / ECUM 1987). There are the beginnings of a Biblical theology of the urban world, insights from the international patterns of urbanisation and inspirational examples of urban mission good practice.

Looking back over the last ten years we can see that much groundwork has been done. Ideas have surfaced, millions of words have been

written, sermons have been preached, suburban Christians have become concerned, and a small amount of money has been transferred to needy causes. There are still gaps in the literature, for example no mainstream publisher has yet produced a book which adequately reflects the contribution of Black led churches. Even "Ten Inner City Churches" edited by Michael Eastman, (Marc Europe 1988) contents itself with a feeble apology for their omission. Phil Mohabir's "Building Bridges" (Marshalls: 1988) is the first step in an attempt to fill the gap. There is also a need for more case study and story material from urban churches to encourage ordinary Christians that God is already at work.

Yet for most urban people books are irrelevant and remain unread. Videos and other visual media may have a role to play. However the primary method of grass roots communication remains personal contact. Whether we are talking about urban evangelism, community work projects, or political action the importance of people and networks is crucial. Over the last ten years we have seen networks of professionals and practitioners in urban mission develop in a healthy way. But if evangelical urban mission is to develop into a mass movement which will substantially change the situation in the urban church and community, we need strategies which will enable Christians at the base to meet, to encourage each other, to share their stories and to take the power which they have so long been denied. In ten years time Ladbrokees may still be giving odds of 1000 to one against a black female archbishop, but we can still hope and work for a church where UPA grass roots Christians become the majority and the mainstream of the church in the UK. If those who ran the "Revival in the Inner City Workshop" have got it right, and if God's Spirit is at work, the next NEAC may see us not in a marquee on the fringe, but in the big top. And better still the big top itself might be pitched not on a university campus as in 1977 or at a holiday camp as in 1988 but in the middle of Hackney Marshes, or Liverpool's Stanley Park.

The following books are available from ECUM at special prices giving a small profit to ECUM.

Dowley	Lost Bequest	£3.50
Bakke	The Urban Christian	£4.95
Paget Wilkes (saving £2)	Poverty Revolution & the Church	£3.00
Eastman	Ten Inner City Churches	£2.95

Please add 50p for p&p.