

BASE COMMUNITIES :
MODELS OF GOOD PRACTICE
IN URBAN BRITAIN

by Greg Smith

August 1987

INTRODUCTION

In recent years in Latin America there has been a massive growth of grass roots Christian communities which represent a "new way of being the church". Out of this movement many penetrating insights about the use of the Scriptures, and God's "preferential option for the poor" have emerged, in the many varied "theologies of liberation". In other parts of the two thirds world, and in Catholic Europe similar communities can also be found. These stories are now becoming known through such publications as Bill Cook's "The Expectation of the Poor" (1), Ian & Margaret Frazers "Wind & Fire" (2) and the report of the 1985 Oxford Centre for Mission studies summer school (3)

But in Britain, although there has been academic interest in liberation theology and many discussions about base communities within British urban mission networks, there are almost no examples of genuine base communities yet to be found. It is not surprising that what is appropriate for the favelas of Sao Paulo, or for a peasant community in Guatemala has not emerged to fit the situation in Wolverhampton, or Bradford. Obviously this is because the BEC's in all their variety are a direct response to the specific social and historical situation in which they find themselves. Broadly speaking this has been life under right wing military dictatorships, gross inequalities of wealth, income and power between an elite and the masses, and a rapid urbanisation which has shattered the security of traditional rural communities. Furthermore historical conditions can change, or be changed rapidly so that the current experiences of Nicaraguan or Philipino BECs is different from their pre-revolution experience. Nor are BECs the only religious response to situations of urban poverty and oppression. Pentecostal and evangelical sects also flourish in Latin American cities. They tend to major on spiritual and psychological needs

and tend to produce individual redemption and lift out of poverty. However, there are lines of communication and some signs that some of the Latin evangelical groups, if freed from American Fundamentalist right wing ideology are moving in similar directions.

Of course there have been episodes in the history of the church when precursors of the BEC's emerged. Before the Reformation groups such as Wycliffe's Lollards and the Franciscans raised some of the questions that emerge from modern BECs. The radical reformers, especially the Anabaptist sects in Europe and Levellers, Diggers and Quakers in Britain formed radical Christian communities at the base of society. Some parts of the Methodist movement, especially the Primitives were clearly the church of the poor, and became involved political and trade union concerns. However, the urban church in Britain has since the industrial revolution tended to succumb to one of three temptations. Either it has become a church to which poor people go but do not control (as is the Irish RC tradition), a church which enables the godly poor to become rich (as in evangelicalism), or a church which marginalises God and makes secular socio-political action paramount (as in the 1890s Labour Churches and 1960s liberal radicals). The BECs can be seen as an attempt to resist all three of these temptations.

One of the frustrating unresolved questions is, "How do we apply the lessons and models of Latin America to the British urban scene?" Should we, or can we, set about the business of planting or building local base christian communities in our inner cities? Once it is recognised that an approach which "parachutes in" Latin American models will a) not work because of different socio-political contexts and b) contradict the underlying philosophy of "bottom up" development, the frustration is lessened. If, on the other hand, we begin to search for distinctive features or markers of the base community approach in existing urban ministries, we will have more encouraging trends to report.

WHAT IS A BASE COMMUNITY?

In order to compare what we have in British models of urban christian life with those in Latin America and Europe it will help us to set up an "ideal type" of base community for comparison. Probably no group, even in the immensely varied scene in Latin America, totally fits this model exactly, but many base communities would come close on most of the characteristics listed. There are perhaps three fundamental features from the movement which we would be looking for in our search for parallel developments among christian groups in urban Britain.

A) The group should to a substantial degree be drawn from the BASE of society; i.e. be church OF the poor.

B) It should to a greater or lesser extent be ECCLESIAL. i.e. it should recognise itself (even if outsiders don't accept it) as belonging to the Christian family and tradition.

C) It should have some emphasis on the notion of COMMUNITY i.e. it must be a mutually supportive group of people and be or seek to be incarnated in the wider life of society around it.

Within Latin American examples of this 'new way of being the church' the following features are also to be found.

d) Hierarchies are absent, and leaders see their role as servants/ enablers. While many BECs were initiated through the work of professional "pastoral agents" the task was seen as one of "conscientisation" and community development in which the full time worker was merely a catalyst. Indeed the introduction of the revised title "pastoral accompanist" indicates the style of ministry seen as appropriate.

e) There are few fences between "us" and "them" (believers and unbelievers). In other words BECs tend to be Catholic rather than Sectarian in membership policy. Perhaps for this reason they are most likely to emerge in the context of a Christendom type social order, rather than in a secularised society with a Protestant ethos and free market system of competing denominations. As a result the concept of evangelism (or more precisely "proselytism") is foreign to most BECs.

f) Scripture is "studied" in context drawing out parallels and application from existing experience, not through the "banking method" of an expert depositing given knowledge in people's heads. The sharing of stories and the presentation of insights through non-verbal methods such as drama and drawings are essential tools in communities where a high level of literacy is not common. The roots of this educational method are found in the work of Paolo Freire and his colleagues (4). Out of it has developed a "new way of doing theology" which is best done in the context of the small group of christians in response to their historical situation at the base of society.

g) There is a sense of walking by faith, of being on pilgrimage, and of travelling light without traditional mental or material baggage. It has been recognised that the old traditional ways of being the institutional church are of little relevance to the everyday struggles of the poor. Worse still the traditional church can often be seen as being on the side of the oppressors in historical struggles, seeking to impose a religious ideology which keeps the poor in their place in this world by the promise of a better place postponed to the hereafter. However most BECs

do not reject the existing church but are a loyal opposition working for its transformation and sub/con-version

h) Reflection and worship is not just formal ritual, or ecstatic escapism but relates to the everyday world and leads to action. The cycle of Action / Reflection / Action is a crucial part of the method of BECs.

i) There is an engagement in the prophetic task of Announcing the Good News of the Kingdom and Denouncing Evil. Inevitably this leads into politics, confrontation and sometimes martyrdom. It means building alliances with those who do not share Christian values, accusations of subversion and Marxism, and in certain historical situations facing up to the hard question of how far to be involved in armed struggle for a just revolution.

j) Base communities grow by networking into a movement, rather than as an organisational structure. Small groups often link into congregations with occasional celebration gatherings involving large numbers. Travelling messengers often pass between different BECs sharing news and mutual encouragement. Such networking has now become international. Inevitably the travelling networkers tend to be the richer and more intellectual members of the BECs. There is a recognised danger that they can become the powerful definers of reality, which can only be countered by a practice of accountability back to the BECs themselves.

In order to assess and summarise where any church or Christian community stands on these features I propose to set up a measuring rod based on the ideal type of a Latin American BEC. If we rate any current group "High", "Mid" or "Low" on these ten variables the one closest to the ideal will be rated as "high" in every case. Inevitably the scores given will be impressionistic (perhaps we need a panel of judges as in a figure skating championship) but should be helpful in assessing where each group is weak or strong. Although I have used the term "ideal type" for a group scoring high on each factor the scores should not be added up, nor does a high rating on every feature imply perfection. You may like to try out your own fellowship using this system, and perhaps to compare it with New Testament churches such as Jerusalem and Corinth.

In the British urban scene there are five types of Christian groupings which show some of the features of base communities. These are

- 1) New House / Community churches and fellowships.
- 2) Black led Pentecostal groups
- 3) Renewed neighbourhood parishes and congregations
- 4) Intentional communities
- 5) Christian community development projects

We will go on now to look at each in turn. It is perhaps a

significant reflection of the compartmentalised thinking of our British Christian culture that none of these groupings scores high on every feature of BECs. Their wholistic approach to Christian discipleship is rarely found in the UK.

1) NEW CHARISMATIC HOUSE OR COMMUNITY CHURCHES:

Most of these tend to be suburban, white middle class, are good on koinonia internally but have high walls (sectarian), tend towards hierarchy and shun politics. There are variations ranging from the Harevestime Restoration fellowships in Bradford (R1 in Walker's terms) (4) to groups like Plaistow Christian Fellowship in East London. There are rapid changes taking place and a wave of concern for the urban poor is emerging, even in R1 groups who are planting cells in council estates in Leeds and Bradford. This can also be seen in R2 groupings such as the Teamwork ministries led by Dave Tomlinson in South West London, and the North London Community churches (led by John Singleton / Locksley Ford / Dave Halls) (5) One major question is whether "prosperity teaching" and links with right wing American moral majority theology will prevail, thus excluding the poor or producing redemption and lift up and out of the inner cities. Other examples with a more conscious urban mission commitment within the ECUM family and worth looking at, include Icthus in South London, and Anfield Road Fellowship in Liverpool (6)

In Tabular form the Bradford Restoration churches might look like this.

A) BASE		Low
B) ECCLESIAL		
Mid-High *		
C) COMMUNITY	a) Internal	High
	b) Incarnational	Low
D) Absence of Hierarchies		Low
E) Catholic / Sectarian		Low
F) Collaborative Learning from Scripture		Low
G) Pilgrimage		High
H) Reflection > Action		Mid
I) Announcing and Denouncing	Mid +	
J) Networking		Mid

* (but "God is doing a new thing")

+ (but in a limited & Right wing direction)

In Newham there are at least three House churches which show some contrasting base community features. Plaistow Christian Fellowship (7) deserves the most detailed examination and might look like this in tabular form

A) BASE	Mid
B) ECCLESIAL	High
C) COMMUNITY a) Internal	High
b) Incarnational	
Mid-High	
D) Absence of Hierarchies	High
E) Catholic / Sectarian	Mid
F) Collaborative Learning from Scripture	High
G) Pilgrimage	Mid
H) Reflection > Action	Mid
I) Announcing and Denouncing	Mid *
J) Networking	High

* (but rarely as a whole church)

The membership of PCF, stands at about 70 (but no-one is quite sure because there are no formal fences for church membership). The largest groups in the fellowship are 1) young marrieds, mostly lower professional classes, owner occupiers, many of whom moved to Newham with a strong sense of calling to mission. 2) Local white working class (or non-working) people, mainly middle aged to elderly, many of whom are new converts or rededications after years of non involvement in the church. Every ethnic group in the locality is represented and there are a significant number of mixed race marriages. Community support within the fellowship is strong with much sharing of tools, cars, accomodation etc. but so far with no permanent communal extended family households. There is a strong incarnational presence, natural on the part of the locals, intentional on the part of incomers who have got stuck into local groups, and institutions.

There is a full time pastor but leadership is plural, and although the team of 6 leaders do set policy and exercise some discipline, a servant/ enabling model is applied. Every member of the fellowship is considered a minister and usually has a specific task allocated. The evangelical theology makes for a certain sectarian emphasis but the wide networking, varied denominational backgrounds and loose membership makes for some element of catholicicity. It is certainly a church on pilgrimage, with no building, new and adaptable traditions of worship and a minimum of stuffiness. Worship and teaching involves many people in a variety of teaching styles including, drama, drawing, group work and videos as well as the traditional sermon and Bible study. Spirituality is rooted in every day experience, though the transition from reflection to action is often rather slow.

In some circles PCF has become the "political Christian Fellowship" since at least 10 members are active in the local Labour Party. One is a councillor, two or three others hold office in the Party and several are school governors. The group of activists, who are almost all young incomers meet from time to time as a support group and prayer group. However the church as a whole avoids taking political positions. The activists are aware of the need for consciousness raising on urban social issues both in church and wider community but as yet have done little about it, other than introducing local social concerns as topics for prayer.

The other two Newham house churches would fall somewhere between the Bradford Restorationists and Plaistow Christian fellowship on most features, so I will not present here a summary Table of their scores.

The Claremont Road Fellowship is the newest of Newham's House Churches and comprises about 30 people, predominantly young and black under the leadership of two professional white women. Linked loosely with some of the R2 networks, very strong on internal community with an "open house" ministry and maintaining strong links in the neighbourhood. So far the fellowship remains largely apolitical, and is perhaps rather sectarian, but is hard to place on many of the other features as it is so young. However, like other churches in the area it is selectively drawing in female and middle class or aspiring middle class people. One of the ways they believe they have seen God at Work is in finding good jobs or college places for youngsters who were once unemployed.

The Christian Family Fellowship in Plaistow originated as a breakaway from the Mayflower Family Centre and brought with it a strong emphasis on being an indigenous church within the East London White working class culture. Quite homogeneous in terms of age, race and background, members still live locally and are rooted in family and neighbourhood networks. However most are upwardly mobile and tend to be owner occupiers. There is a shared non-hierarchical leadership, a down to earth practical spirituality, developing networking which has included links with Roman Catholics and a strong caring ministry. There is a tendency to dismiss or criticize local politics although one of the leaders was once a councillor.

2) BLACK PENTECOSTAL CHURCHES

Black Led Pentecostal Churches have been mainly churches of the poor with memberships consisting of working class people who felt/were excluded from other churches. They developed their own leadership and pastoral support systems but have been largely invisible to the mainstream of society and church. There is an

underlying struggle for respectability, and prosperity is visibly setting in some of the younger generation christians. Despite all the racism and blockages, a higher proportion of church going young people than non churchgoers in the black community appear to be taking up college places and finding work.

There is in many black christian groups a tendency to sectarianism and separation from the world. In part American evangelical theology has encouraged pietism and the avoidance of politics. However an increasing number of black christians in the Pentecostal churches are articulating their experiences of racism, unemployment and other social issues. Increasingly the churches are becoming involved in social projects particularly in educational and unemployment projects for the young and in day centres and other ministries to the elderly. For example the New Testament Church of God in Leeds and the New Testament Assemblies in Leyton are setting up or running such schemes. In Wolverhampton the Moathouse Lane Community Project runs similar work, and although it is not officially a Christian organisation it is largely managed by leaders of local Pentecostal churches. In Stonebridge Park the Harlesden People's Community Council which runs the massive Bus Garage project is another example of community work largely initiated by black Christians.

I hesitate as a white outsider to make the following comments and stand open to correction by those who have an inside knowledge of the Black community and churches. On the whole Black pentecostal churches have a strong hierarchical and authoritarian structure, although they encourage participation and ministry from every member. These tendencies reflect the importance of respect and the recognition of status within the Afro-Caribbean culture, and probably provide an alternative status system for people who are given no status within a racist society. So far I have seen little evidence of the development of collaborative learning style. Rather the preaching and language used in worship seems to be ritually rhetoric, with more emphasis devoted to the form than to the content.

In Tabular form a typical Black Pentecostal Church might score like this

A) BASE	High
B) ECCLESIAL	High
C) COMMUNITY a) Internal	High
b) Incarnational	Low
D) Absence of Hierarchies	Low
E) Catholic / Sectarian	Low
F) Collaborative Learning from Scripture	Low
G) Pilgrimage	Mid
H) Reflection > Action	Low
I) Announcing and Denouncing	Low
J) Networking	High

3) INTENTIONAL COMMUNITIES

During the last few years there has been an increasing presence of intentional communities in urban areas. Some of the traditional orders such as the Society of St Francis have been around and involved in neighbourhood community and church life for many years. Other orders such as the Community of the Sacred Passion have come to the inner city more recently from an experience of overseas mission. The story of their convent in a Council House in Walsall is particularly enlightening. (8)

More recently there has been the emergence of new forms of Community living such as the Ashram Houses linked with John Vincent's Urban Theology Unit and the USPG Roots Groups. Most of these have been based on young middle class incomers, who have come to live in christian community for a few years after college. The religious discipline is usually not so strict as in the traditional orders. In some ways this movement represents a de-institutionalised form of the old University settlements. In the best of these communities a good presence in local neighbourhood activities has been developed and members have often been politically involved and active, in third world, peace, anti-racist and occasionally in local issues. Such groups are quite likely to be familiar with the literature on BEC's and to talk about Paolo Friere's educational methods and liberation theology. But often the cultural gap between the incomers and the locals is huge and the prayer and worship side of the community's life tends to exclude the local poor, and fails to relate deeply to indigenous members of local congregations.

In Tabular form a typical new intentional community might score as follows.

A) BASE	Low
B) ECCLESIAL	Mid
C) COMMUNITY a) Internal	High
b) Incarnational	Mid
(aspiring)	
D) Absence of Hierarchies	High
E) Catholic / Sectarian	High
F) Collaborative Learning from Scripture	High
G) Pilgrimage	Mid
H) Reflection > Action	High
I) Announcing and Denouncing	High
J) Networking	Mid

4) RENEWED NEIGHBOURHOOD CHURCHES

Some parish and neighbourhood churches in urban areas have taken on some of the characteristics of base communities. Sometimes when renewal takes place in a parish it leads to involvement in community, new forms of leadership, evangelism & numerical growth. But there may well be a tension with institutional structures of the denomination, and an inability to shed the traditions which are a burden for those who see the group as a band of pilgrims. In some ways this reflects a tension in the Latin American situation where base communities often come to see themselves as a loyal opposition within the church. One of the problems in such situations is that so much depends on the leadership style and charisma of trained clergy who inevitably come from outside the community, and are often locked into a priestly or "one man superstar" perception of their role. However, much can be achieved if the style of leadership is patterned on that of the Latin American "pastoral agent/accompanist", who enables rather than directs.

Examples of such churches would include St. Agnes Burmantofts in Leeds, St Marks Forest Gate in London, and Holme URC in Bradford. All three churches have a majority of local indigenous people in their membership, although professional incomers are also found. The three churches are loyal but perhaps challenging to their denominations, and form supportive communities for their members. Relationships with and service to the neighbourhood form a major part of their mission and worship and teaching relates to local issues. Experimental forms of church leadership, both formal and informal are to be found and there has been some development of appropriate Bible teaching methods. Socio political involvement has been largely in the form of sponsoring community groups and projects although there is a growing awareness of local political issues. In St. Agnes a considerable number of church members are politically active in

the community through the local branch of the Liberal Party.

In tabular form such a church might appear thus:

A) BASE	High
B) ECCLESIAL	High
C) COMMUNITY a) Internal	Mid
b) Incarnational	High
D) Hierarchies	Mid
E) Catholic / Sectarian	Mid
F) Collaborative Learning from Scripture	Mid
G) Pilgrimage	Low *
H) Reflection > Action	Mid
I) Announcing and Denouncing	Mid
J) Networking	Mid

* (if only we could!)

5.) CHURCH BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Christian sponsored community development projects are increasingly found in urban areas. They are usually attached to, but often distinct from local parish churches. But so far there appear to be few examples which are truly ecclesial. An ongoing issue is whether a Christian community worker should seek to evangelise or feel guilty if s/he fails. Generally in such projects they do not, and local people who do come on board have little sense of belonging to the Christian tradition. They are rarely involved in worship and the use of scripture is virtually unknown.

One example which comes to mind is a Church Action on Poverty sponsored group on a council estate in Tyneside (9). The local vicar has been engaged in community development and drawn together a group of working class women who are very locally rooted. They are involved in community projects of many sorts and have been active politically in pressure group work on housing and benefits. There has been a clear process of political conscientisation but the worship element is absent. The women have a folk religion form of Christianity and in some sense want to see God in it all, but have no time for the church. The parish church stands on a hill at the edge of the estate, draws its congregation from the posher part of town and is seen as irrelevant and unwelcoming by the estate dwellers. A similar style of working can be found in the neighbourhood project on the Isle of Dogs established by the Poplar Methodist Mission (10).

In Tabular form such projects might score as follows.

A) BASE	High
B) ECCLESIAL	Low
C) COMMUNITY a) Internal	Mid
b) Incarnational	Low
D) Absence of Hierarchies	High
E) Catholic / Sectarian	High
F) Collaborative Learning from Scripture	Low
G) Pilgrimage	Mid
H) Reflection > Action	Low
I) Announcing and Denouncing	High
J) Networking	Mid

CONCLUSIONS

In summary it seems we cannot hope to find in urban Britain any group which reflects all the features of the ideal type base community. However many christian groups and projects have learned from and adapted some base community features. Is this a case of the Spirit of God teaching similar lessons to diverse sections of his people, or of ideas from the Third World slowly filtering through to the North?

Having examined a few examples of good practice I want to suggest that in the British urban scene there are two main factors which prevent full base communities emerging.

1) The gap between the trendy urban professionals (in the church and community) who are open to base community thinking and practice, and the traditional conservative religious and social attitudes of people at the base of society. Who has the false consciousness here?

2) The overwhelming influence of individualism, which privatises and depoliticises everything in social and religious life. This is largely a result of Protestant / Evangelical theology and values. Perhaps this helps to explain why base communities have flourished more in Catholic cultures. Sadly those Christians who value the scriptures most are the least likely to use them towards liberation.

On the other hand the fact that some base community features are emerging, and that in ECUM and other urban networks we are talking about base communities are signs of hope. The urban world and church is in considerable flux. In the midst of the inner city kaleidoscope (collide-oscope?) we should be open to new forms of christian life which are emerging. We need not be too concerned if they fail to match in detail the base community model. What matters is that they, and we, reflect the values and lifestyle of the Kingdom of God.

REFERENCES

- (1) Cook W "The Expectation of the Poor : Base Communities in Protestant Perspective" Orbis
- (2) I & M Frazer "Wind & Fire: The spirit reshapes the church in basic christian communities" Scottish Churches House.
- (3) Transformation Vol 3/3 July/Sept 1986
- (4) See Andrew Walker's "Restoring the Kingdom" (Hodder) for a definition of these terms
- (5) See "10 Growing Churches" edited by Eddie Gibbs (MARC Europe).
- (6) both of these churches tell their stories in "10 New Churches" edited by Roger Forster (MARC Europe).
- (7) In "10 Inner City Churches" ed. M. Eastman forthcoming (MARC Europe)
- (8) It is written up in Christian Action (Summer 1985).
- (9) Church Action on Poverty : Poverty Network folder no 7
- (10) City Cries Spring 1987

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper which is written for inclusion in a proposed ECUM pamphlet / journal issue on Base Communities and their relevance in Britain emerged out of :

- a) my attendance at the Base Communities Course at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies in August 1985.
- b) a follow up ECUM consultation in Liverpool with Norman Winter and Dave Cave in September 1985
- c) ongoing research which I am undertaking with the God at Work in the Inner City research project which is jointly sponsored by ECUM and the British Church Growth Association. We are grateful to MARC (Europe) and TEAR fund for their financial contribution to the expenses of this project.

The comments and assessments of individual churches which are made in this paper are my own personal observations. I have not

had time to reflect these back to the people concerned for comment so I ask them to bear with me if there are any errors of detail, fact or interpretation.

NEW WAYS OF BEING THE CHURCH

Review Article : April 1989

Greg Smith

"Church for Liberation; A pastoral portrait of the church in Brazil"
(1987) by David Regan 230pp Dominican Publications / Fowler Wright
Books £7.95

"The Church as the Kingdom" (1987) by Peter Price ; 179pp Marshall
Pickering £4.95

"Radical Christianity" (1988) Christopher Rowland; 161pp + notes and
bibliography; Polity Press £7.95

The renewal of the church so that it becomes more faithful, open, participatory, relevant and more of a force for changing the world is perhaps the key question for Christians at the end of the 20th Century. The publication within a year of these three books by a Roman Catholic missionary priest, an Anglican vicar of evangelical background from Croydon and a Cambridge academic theologian suggests that the search for renewal is widespread. The fact that each of spends considerable time looking towards Latin America may indicate from which direction the wind is blowing. At the risk of straining the metaphor, as that wind blows over the neck of the empty milk bottles which represent our urban churches, perhaps they will begin to resonate with some pleasant tuneful notes.

IN BRAZIL

"Church for Liberation" is an account of the changes in the Catholic church in Brazil over the last thirty years. Told by an Irish missionary who spent twenty of those years in the country, six of them on the staff of the National Bishops' Conference, it is a balanced but committed account of the consequences for a national church of

choosing the "option for the poor". Regan tells of the growth of thousands of base ecclesial communities. They emerged as a response to an unevangelised but nominally Catholic society where fundamentalist protestant sects, secular Marxism and Brazilio-African spiritist movements were beginning to make inroads. This growth was set in the political reality of a repressive military dictatorship, and an economic situation which made a few privileged people extremely wealthy and the vast majority almost destitute.

One of the key factors which the author describes in some detail is the new way of reading the Bible in the context of oppression. In Brazil this is typified by "the land problem" where in both urban and jungle situations ruthless developers regularly use bands of thugs and assassins to drive people from their homes. "Perhaps" writes Regan "only a scourge of epic dimensions could have given rise to a new hermeneutic as answer. The volume of prayer and intensity of

reflection required to discover and popularise a hitherto overlooked vein of Biblical riches is unlikely to be produced by everyday situations or blossom out of academic calm..... The small communities are quite well aware the Bible has not got ready made answers to complex problems or a plan of action for dealing with the thugs.... But it was sound instinct that led them to the Scripture for aid."

One of the most interesting parts of the story is the process of conversion and resistance still being worked out among the church hierarchy. With Dom Helder Camara in the forefront, many of the bishops became convinced that poverty is indeed a spiritual issue and that God is crying out for injustices to be righted. The key to conversion was their pastoral contact with the poor and visitations to local parishes in the shanty towns and deprived rural areas. Gradually some of the bishops moved from a princely model of their ministry to an enabling servant model.

While many readers will want to read the signs of the Holy Spirit at work in this process, it is clear there are no short cuts from the political struggle. We see groups of radical bishops caucusing and organising before the plenary sessions of the Bishops conference, we hear the passion of debate and the hammering out of compromise resolutions. We see also the reaction and caution of the papacy, and the accusations that liberation theology is thinly disguised Marxism flying from governmental and church opponents. The story of the attempt to silence theologian Leonardo Boff is told by Regan with plenty of quotations from the case for the defence. The book ends in 1986 at a hopeful point in Brazilian church history, with a return to civilian democracy in the nation and a more mellow accepting attitude towards the liberation theologians on the part of the Roman hierarchy.

IN THE UK?

Peter Price's "The Church as the Kingdom" is written at a more accessible level, particularly for non-Catholic readers whose experience of the church has been confined to the U.K. Perhaps because of that it strikes even closer to home. The author has visited Latin America and is aware of what is happening in Base Communities there and in other areas of the third world. However most of the anecdotes he relates are from Britain, from little communities of Christians in Belfast and Toxteth, from Iona and Corymeela, from his own parishes in Portsmouth and Croydon. In each case they are about small groups of Christians struggling faithfully and fitfully to discover a new, more relevant, way of being the church.

Price is in no doubt that the Kingdom of God is radical, is corporate and is political. The church is called to be a community running against the tide of materialism, individualism, worldliness and success. It is to be a community in solidarity with the poor, resistant to injustice, expecting to hear God speak through scripture and everyday life, rooted in lively corporate worship which is rooted in

reality and leads to action. Ministries are to be shared and open, not left for the (white male) professionals to do everything. Such a church would indeed be a sign and vanguard of the Kingdom of God.

"The Church as Kingdom" makes a brave attempt to apply the vision of base communities to the British urban situation. The author correctly points out the value of the "Faith in the City" report in raising some of the key questions for the urban church and community. He justifiably criticises the Commission's summary dismissal of the base community vision as irrelevant for British Cities. Of course there is no directly transferrable blueprint which can be imposed across the cultural gulf between Sao Paolo and Sunderland. Yet if we are prepared to learn "we too can release the Spirit to create the church people want."

Peter Price concludes by suggesting ways forward which allow him and other Christians to discover a new way of being the church within the Anglican system. I suppose we must not lose hope that even General Synod and the House of Bishops will eventually be converted, in a similar way to many of the Brazilian bishops. Perhaps because I am a non-conformist at heart, perhaps because I am too impatient, perhaps because I see the inertia of all large institutions, and the innate conservatism of the upper middle class English Anglicans who control the church, I find it much harder to see the radical changes which we need taking place, without a radical break with the system as a whole.

IN HISTORY

Rowland's "Radical Christianity" in contrast goes back to the roots of the subversive gospel tradition. It is a more scholarly work with lots of references and notes and an approach to Scripture which relies heavily on critical scholarship. At times this seems frustrating for those who are more accustomed to using the Bible in a more direct way in groups of ordinary believers, and making "snap" connections between the text and the reality of the social context. However Rowland's scholarship builds a strong foundation for his arguments and is especially interesting as he traces the development, routinisation and transformation of radical ideas through the Gospels, the Pauline literature and the book of Revelation.

Understanding the Apocalypse and the use made of it in church history is crucial to understanding the persistence of radical Christianity, and it is here that Rowland excels. His key argument is that Apocalyptic as exemplified in the last book of the Bible is not mainly about revealing the future to curious believers, with the result that they can forget about present struggles. Rather it is a key for understanding what is happening now, and for encouraging believers to live responsibly as witnesses (martyrs) to the reign of God, in opposition to the injustices of the present world order symbolised as Babylon.

The author traces the influence of these ideas through selected

episodes of church history. In the early church the Montanists represented a radical prophetic renewal movement in which lay people and women played a key part. In the middle ages Joachim of Fiore and the Franciscans rediscovered the same themes. The radical reformation, in particular Thomas Muenzer in Germany, and Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers in (of all places) Cobham, Surrey spoke and lived as though the promise of the millenium had earthly relevance for the present age. Sadly the former perished in the Peasants' war having decided to bear arms for God's kingdom while the latter seems to have become disillusioned at the difficulty of affecting a deep and radical conversion of the human heart and lifestyle.

Jumping through three centuries, the book misses some of the most interesting episodes in the development of radical Christianity, such as primitive Methodism, and the origins of Black led Pentecostal Holiness movements. But Rowland does examine liberation theology and the base communities of Brazil adequately, if in much less depth, than Regan. Briefly he comments on the situation in Nicaragua and South Africa. In the concluding chapter the author's commitments and passion are finally revealed. "The alternative tradition seems to be madness to the world... the conviction that faith must primarily be about doing something runs like a thread through the previous pages. The struggle against injustice remains at the heart of those committed to the good news of Jesus Christ."

IMPLICATIONS

The three books together raise two profound questions particularly for the urban evangelical reader. The first is about the shape of the Church which God wants to build in impoverished and oppressed communities which are barely evangelised. How can they become more open, liberating, Biblical, witnessing to the Kingdom and committed to changing the world? What lessons can we learn from Latin America and what type of conversion are we willing to undergo? The second is the scandal of the dominant evangelical reading of Scripture, which is individualistic, spiritual and other worldly, yet produces a church conformed to the world and supportive of the status quo. In the last analysis if by our actions or inaction we are found to be on the side of the oppressors, the cries of "Lord, Lord, we prophesied, we drove out demons, we performed miracles in your name", will be no defence.