

THE URBAN CHURCH: THREE YEARS ON FROM *FAITHFUL CITIES*

A report from the Bishop for Urban Life and Faith

[GS1745 Urban Life and Faith](#)

Introduction

1. Three years ago the Archbishop of York on behalf of both Archbishops asked me lay down my pastoral responsibilities as Bishop of Hulme and to become the first Bishop for Urban Life and Faith. The Archbishop wanted a Bishop to follow up *Faithful Cities* in the same way that *Faith in the City* had been followed up 20 years previously.

2. The context has been very different. *Faithful Cities* has not had the impact on the conscience of Church and Nation of its predecessor although three years on many of its predictions have already been fulfilled. But the Church of England still holds on to its parochial system maintaining a ministry to every inhabitant of this country, where the overwhelming majority live in urban communities. It has taken this responsibility seriously and has used its historic resources to maintain that ubiquitous presence not only because of the obligations of 'Establishment' but because theologically it believes it vital to sustain a ministry to the needier, marginalised parts of our nation.

3. My task has been to ensure that the 'urban agenda' remains at the heart of the Church's mission. This has meant visiting and meeting with bishops, clergy and lay people from all the dioceses. It has involved a continuing political dialogue, particularly with Government. Contextual theological reflection which was such an important part of *Faithful Cities* has remained a priority. The encouragement of the men and women engaged in demanding urban ministry has been an important part of my ministry.

4. This report will reflect on what has happened to our urban communities since the publication of *Faithful Cities*. It will also provide the General Synod with some more personal reflections on the state of the Church's mission to our urban communities

and some of the challenges that lie ahead. Needless to say I owe a great debt of gratitude for the support given to me by Andrew Davey, National Adviser for Community and Urban Affairs, Tim Bissett, Chief Executive of the Church Urban Fund, the Urban Bishops' Panel which I have chaired, Canon Professor Elaine Graham and the Archbishop of York who has been my encouraging and supportive 'line-manager'.

Faithful Cities Three years on

5. *Faithful Cities* is a useful starting point. There have been other occasions to assess the implementation of that report and its recommendations so I would like to examine how some of the insights, theology and analysis remain relevant. Like its predecessor, *Faith in the City*, the 2006 *Faithful Cities* report is very much a snapshot of a particular time, as it attempts to hold the tensions between the Church's engagement with physical and social regeneration as a partner, and the Church as a prophetic voice through its continued presence in the poorest marginalized communities. Unlike *Faith in the City* things have changed rather more rapidly than anyone expected.

6. In just three years the urban scene has changed significantly. The economic recession and downturn has put pressure on credit and real estate, the cornerstones of the regeneration industry, in the eye of the financial storm. This has had serious consequences for the renewal of urban places and communities as many regeneration projects have been put 'on ice'. The end of the Single Regeneration Budget and the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund also marks a considerable shift taking place in the constitution of the regeneration sector. The trade journals, such as *Regeneration and Renewal*, seem remarkably thin – not least the jobs section. Questions remain about significant targets, restructuring and programmes in the pipeline such as the 2020 housing targets, subnational review and proposed eco-towns. Significant regeneration and growth areas, for example, Thames Gateway, currently seem to be stagnating with few non-Olympic related programmes entering new phases. Consumption-led regeneration seems dead in the water or beached – a recently lauded shopping mall was soon dismissed as 'a dinosaur: heavily serviced, energy hungry,

expensive to run, poorly suited to the new economy'. The promised expansion in privately built social and affordable housing is now unlikely to materialise.

7. As the impact of the economic turbulence moves beyond the financial sector to the service and manufacturing sector unemployment begins to figure on our policy agenda. Increases in redundancies and subsequent unemployment bring problems very different, and of a far greater scale to those envisaged by the Government's 'worklessness agenda' and the *Future Jobs* programme. Some one suggested this feels more like the era of high unemployment which produced *Faith in the City*. The background paper prepared for the February General Synod debate on the recession recalled those times warning that 'many practitioners who were active in the 1980s would testify that the church often made mistakes in its attempts to address the local effects of economic hardship'.

8. Some of the questions raised in *Faithful Cities* about models of economics and regeneration may be more relevant than we expected –not least those about capital/credit led regeneration and its focus on real estate, about the reality of a 'faith sector' and its voice in the public square, as well as the potential of a 'social capital' analysis of their contribution.

The language of urban 'renaissance' has glossed over the less palatable by-products of property-driven economic development, while the human cost of rising property prices for those shut out of the bubble has received little public attention. (*Faithful Cities* MHP 2006.p.46)

9. The fate of regeneration models we have learnt to live with and at times, if not love, at least tolerate, is a concern. While community empowerment has been a significant theme in the Department for Communities and Local Government there are many who have been involved as community representatives in local regeneration partnerships who have had their 'capacity built' who do risk having their contribution devalued or ignored in the new climate. Less than a fifth of the Government's flagship Working Neighbourhoods Fund has been allocated to community organisations despite promises that the £1.5 billion would provide a 'concentrated, concerted community-led' approach to getting the long-term unemployed back to work.

10. If you search the actual text of *Faithful Cities* with words such as ‘debt’, ‘credit’, ‘finance’ and ‘borrowing’ the results are almost totally concerned with domestic finance, the difficulty of obtaining credit and the work of credit unions. We need to remember that these remain the critical survival issues for thousands of people who live on benefits or the minimum wage.

11. One paragraph in *Faithful Cities* stands out as a reminder of the Church’s need for analysis and prophecy when accepted certainties are shifting.

Congregations and their leaders need an accurate understanding of the changing context in which they operate – and the impact of social and economic change on their mission. They also need practical examples of what ‘alternative performance’ involves. This may simply mean identifying how their existing practices form people and community in ways that challenge the dominant culture. Or it may mean finding new ways to do so. ‘The task,’ writes theologian Walter Brueggemann, ‘is to empower people to engage in history...evoking cries that expect answers, learning to address them where they will be taken seriously, and ceasing to look to the numbed and dull empire that never intended to answer in the first place.’ (*Faithful Cities* MHP 2006.p.49)

12. Maybe the question that should be injected into all those questions of sustainability and the good city should concern how areas such as those that have undergone change with New Deal for Communities and other regeneration initiatives fare in a time of economic recession. Is this the ultimate sustainability test; not least how is all that social capital that has been built through community empowerment, and our church activities, really going to pay out in the coming months and years?

13. Commentators, for some time, have been noting the shift away from designated ‘urban’ policy, found particularly in the analysis offered by Lord Rogers’ *Towards an Urban Renaissance* report and the *State of the Cities* report. Urban policy affects millions but it is not defined departmentally or demographically in the same way as rural affairs. Alan Cochrane notes that it is ‘difficult to specify the boundaries

between urban and other social policies' and subsequently, if not appropriately managed, urban policy can become 'an overlapping patchwork without any clear or consistent overall unified agenda'. (*Urban Policy*, Blackwell 2007, p.137)

14. Has urban policy run out of steam or evaporated? What is the policy architecture that enables debate about our corporate expressions of life together in dense geographical locations? Both major parties have shifted the emphasis away from social regeneration and the built environment towards governance issues, not least local government reform and the elected mayors' debate. Recently established regional formations are likely to be eclipsed by the new concept of city-regions. Work continues on some of the most marginal communities mentioned in *Faithful Cities*, particularly coastal communities.

15. So what will be the new questions we ask of urban strategies – the question of vibrancy and conviviality rather than competitive advantage? Could we find a measure for the amount of activity that forsakes CCTV controlled, gated or privatised space – religious, social, educational - for a measure of wellbeing that is embracing of others and community affirming?

Asylum and Migration

16. Changing patterns of migration continues to reshape local populations amidst cultures of suspicion and fear perpetuated by harsher control rhetoric from politicians, and the extreme right. The situation of those at the end of the asylum process has become increasingly dire. The introduction of more control through 'managed migration' particularly the 'Points Based System' has raised questions about the nature of the migration which the government wants to encourage or discourage. The current Borders Immigration and Citizenship legislation reinforces this with the concept of earned citizenship through various hoops rather than residence and assent.

17. Reports from the Independent Asylum Commission, the Centre for Social Justice, as well as the Cross Party Group on Balanced Migration, have all contributed to the debate. As a result of the *Faithful Cities* report the Archbishops' Council joined the *Still Human Still Here* Coalition campaigning on the plight of destitute end of process

asylum seekers. The significance of this was felt in the February Synod debate on asylum where a remarkable level of testimony was heard about congregations' experience of the asylum system.

18. Recent years have also seen new patterns of European immigration and emigration. Hybridity and the post-secular situation of our cities provide the context for the Church's engagement with local communities. But alongside this needs to be put the experience of marginality felt by the white working class which found expression in recent support for the BNP in the European Elections and the 'British Jobs' demonstrations. The Runnymede report *Who Cares about the White Working Class?* underlines the persistence of class and race as key factors, not least in the battleground of social housing.

Social Housing

19. Housing is a basic right and is surrounded in emotive discourse about belonging and entitlement. It is therefore easy to manipulate politically. As a dwindling resource, social housing has become a flagship issue for the BNP. Housing allocation is easy to represent as a site of unfairness, particularly when it can be identified with new migrants or oblique practices.

Housing is not the be-all and end-all of why so many white working-class British people feel abandoned, but it occupies a special place in the emotional chain of attachments to the State and to other people, standing where 'community' meets 'society'. Ceding the ideological ground to the far right is one danger. Yet the content of their ideas only becomes a possibility when the material side is neglected in the first place. The framing issue is that there is not enough social housing in the UK at a moment when the price of private housing is simply unaffordable for a vast swathe of people on low to medium incomes, and even stretches the budgets of those on above average incomes. (Kjartan Páll Sveinsson *Who Cares about the White Working Class?* Runnymede Trust 2009. p.50.)

Inequality and Childhood

20. Probably the two most significant publications of recent months raise common cause on the future of our urban populations. The Children Society's *Good Childhood* report and Richard Wilkinson and Jane Pickett's *Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*.

21. The *Good Childhood* report spoke of the need for a reimagination of 'soft' values, a moral vocabulary – love, respect, understanding, hope - if children are to feel they are invested in and have an investment in the future. The values that children absorb will be those of the world around them.

Children flourish when they have a sense of meaning in their lives, which comes from, social engagement and from enthusiastic development of their own interests and talents....(*A Good Childhood* Penguin 2009.p.9)

22. This of course touches on schooling and education – what are the models that will prove sustainable, effective, equitable, deliverable, that form character and habits, and the desire to be a decent person? The recent NASUWT report of schools in an urban environment is adamant about the need to consider context, and rebuild trust and connectivity between school and immediate community 'throughout government policy, schools are presented as though they exist in isolation from the surrounding area'. (*One More broken window*. NASUWT 2009) I think it is true to say that, the majority of our church schools prove the exception to this, through their critical engagement with the lives of their parishes communities.

23. The *Good Childhood* report stressed the need for evidence and interpretation, which is what Wilkinson and Pickett provide in their call to, 'wake up and smell the statistics.'

24. What do the statistics tell us about the result of being (in the words of one Government minister) ‘intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich’?

25. In an interview Pickett said;

Everything stacks up. Reducing inequality fits in with the environmental agenda; it benefits the developing world, as more equal societies give more in overseas aid; and most significantly, everyone is fed up with the corporate greed and bonus culture that have caused the current financial crisis, so if ever a government had the electorate's goodwill to act, it's now. (*The Guardian* 12 March 2009)

26. At a time when there is talk about changing values in public and political life I believe there is also opportunity to reimagine how we approach the huge inequalities in our society, not least our urban areas. This is a political project which must change the places we live in.

The local political agenda

New geographies get constructed through political projects, and the production of space is as much a political and moral as a physical fact. The way life gets lived in spaces, places and environments is [...] the beginning and end of political action. (David Harvey ‘Cosmopolitanism and the Banality of Geographical Evils’ in *Popular Culture*. Duke University Press. Vol. 12. No. 2. Spring 2000. p.560)

27. So ‘What Makes a Good City?’ remains a key question which the Church must address as part of its Urban Mission. Throughout the last three years Andrew Davey and I have been encouraging local debates between Church, statutory agencies including Local Authorities, local commerce and the community and voluntary sector. The question has been asked in Plymouth, Gosport, Wigan, Gloucester, Halifax and Norwich (to name a few). Partnerships have been formed and strengthened as the fundamental questions about the quality and values of urban living have begun to be addressed.

28. The Church of England is in a unique position to promote and mediate in these debates. Our ubiquity, our independence and our values, arising from our faith, mean that we are seen as respected sponsors by other faiths, by the third sector and by the statutory (and often very competitive) agencies. At a time of political and economic uncertainty this sort of initiative should be happening in every diocese. I commend a five week course designed by the Bishop of Selby on ‘What makes a Good Community?’ to parishes and community groups who want to take up this challenge. (Available on the York Diocese website). Last December we spent an important day with newly consecrated and other bishops looking at the key roles of the bishop in the life of our urban communities.

Political Relationships

29. Establishing good relationships with Government has not been made easy by the fact that the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government has seen four incarnations in three years. I have had meetings with David Cameron, Caroline Spelman (Shadow Communities and Local Government), Stephen Timms, Shahid Malik, Phil Woolas, Alistair Burt, and Simon Hughes, as well as a number of backbench MPs. I was involved in a fascinating dialogue on a Christian perspective on the economic and financial crisis with John McFall, Chair of the Treasury Select Committee.

30. It was clear at an early stage that problems of religious literacy amongst local statutory organisations in particular was seriously damaging the contribution that many faith organisations could make to the well-being of their local communities. The development of a nationally recognised programme of training for national and local government and other statutory bodies now seems imminent after 3 years of detailed negotiation not only ecumenically but with multi-faith sponsorship and some government development funding.

Rethinking welfare

31. Similarly the response to political and diocesan pressure about the Church's involvement in contracted welfare provision led to the production of *Moral – but no Compass* by the Von Hugel Institute. This has done much to help politicians recognise the Church of England as the largest voluntary organisation in the country and its enormous contribution to welfare, youth and of course educational provision. The report raised the issues that both Government and the Church have to address if we are to play a greater part in welfare provision over the next decade. All political parties seem to be agreed that the Third Sector (of which the Church is a major part) must play an increased role in service provision. Many churches and dioceses have embarked on this road, sometimes ill-equipped to deal with the complexities of contracts, outputs and funding programmes. The Church Urban Fund has been working with me, Communities and Local Government and the Office of the Third Sector to see whether government funding can be found to resource a service to dioceses and parishes undertaking new projects. Once again government seems fearful that offering us support would offend its multi-faith credentials despite their acknowledgment that we are overwhelmingly the major players.

The Urban Clergy

32. I have been able to take away 150 clergy, nominated by their Diocesan Bishops, (generously supported by the Henry Smith charity) for 48 hours to a comfortable hotel to listen to them, encourage them and affirm them in their ministries. It has been a remarkable experience. I have included some of the comments in an appendix because they are so revealing of the well-being of those who are called to ministry in some very demanding contexts. Many feel unvalued, unheard and struggling with diocesan value systems that see 'success' as measured entirely numerically and financially. Their views of 'the diocese' vary from very supportive to what can only be described as benign neglect.

33. So much depends on whether the Diocesan Bishop or members of his senior staff have real inner-urban or outer estate experience. The pressures on partners and family; petty vandalism and break-ins; higher insurance costs; issues of children and education; the late night knocks at the vicarage door for money and food; small

congregations and lack of skills amongst the laity; a sense of loneliness and isolation; building problems that overwhelm and few financial resources to do anything about them; never being quite sure what is going on in the street outside the vicarage when the noise level rises; all are part of the living experience of our urban clergy. Yet most would not want to be anywhere else. Their sense of vocation and job satisfaction is high. There is a passion about what they are doing with real problems about taking time off and providing proper boundaries for family and personal life.

34. My experience is that we are very bad as a church at valuing and encouraging our inner urban and outer estate clergy. It does matter if the Bishop finds time to listen to what is happening and understands. It does matter if leading laity in the Diocese are prepared to come and listen to the PCC and their stories. Many urban clergy have given up on diocesan structures because the value system is dominated by comfortable suburban churches often congregationally rather than parochially focussed. As a result their voice is not often heard and their needs not articulated. Encouraging urban clergy to tell their stories in an informal, hospitable environment can mean so much to them.

35. Some dioceses excel in taking their urban clergy away or arranging listening lunches. Others seem to see such initiatives as ‘molly-coddling’ or ‘low down the list of priorities’. Listening to others’ stories is important so the view that Ministerial Development Review will fill the need is simply not sustainable. If the Church wants men and women to take on these very demanding ministries it must provide proper support, encouragement and companionship in ministry. It must also develop training paths appropriate to both attract and develop skills in urban ministry.

36. The Urban Bishops’ Panel has been considering for sometime the condition and future of training for urban parochial ministry. We realise that this places an unfashionable emphasis on a particular location for ministry within a generic training environment ; with a curriculum under constant pressure with requests from different constituencies. We believe, however, that there are important issues which apply to an understanding of ministry with a specific locational emphasis – be it rural or urban, or the many subcategories within them.

37. Urban ministry is hard work and is in danger of being perceived as unrewarding within the targets orientated culture we have adopted. It is challenging, but it should not be portrayed as an encumbrance or minority interest. We believe that a renewed vision of the particular challenges of urban ministry needs to be part of a strategic commitment to effective parish-based mission across and within the diverse communities of contemporary Britain. If these issues are not taken seriously by the Bishops, theological colleges and courses then the Church will simply run out of clergy willing and able to take up these posts.

Encouraging Theological Reflection

38. *Faithful Cities* identifies the essentially performative nature of an engaged, practical, public urban theology.

It makes no sense to claim that theology is primarily or exclusively expressed in doctrinal statements or academic treatises. On the contrary, we understand that these propositions are derived from the incarnational principles already enacted and embodied. (*Faithful Cities* MHP 2006 p.14)

39. The ‘What makes a good city?’ debate, and dialogue between theologians and urbanists have provoked interest in the prophetic and missional consequences of an ethical account of urban life. Two journals - *CONTACT: Practical Theology & Pastoral Care* and *The International Journal of Public Theology* have dedicated themed editions to these issues. To these need to be added Laurie Green and Chris Baker’s work on Thames Gateway and other new communities – *Building Utopia?* (SPCK 2008) My now published book with Elaine Graham – *What makes a good city?* (DLT 2009) is a much longer reflection on urban ministry and mission than is possible here. The work of the Urban Mission and Theology Project is currently being edited for publication.

40. I have offered a number of seminars across the country in an attempt to get clergy and lay people theologically reflecting on the context of their ministry. However the most successful has been the series this year funded by the Economic and Social Research Council in partnership with Manchester University and the William Temple Foundation. Entitled ‘Faith, Secularism and Public Policy’ these have involved

around 40 participants, speakers from the US, Australia and the UK covering a fascinating range of subjects including one hosted at the BBC. It is hoped to publish the papers from the series.

41. It is worth noting that a recent book from our leading urban geographer Doreen Massey: *World City* (Polity 2007), is a call for a corporate exercise in moral imagination. The way we think about cities- geographically, socially, economically- is, like theology, *performative*, responsibility needs to be taken for how our geographies are acted out in the local and global web we are part of. London, for example, does not exist in a vacuum in which its own regeneration and reinvention takes place. Neither can London be portrayed as a victim of global forces, because many of them have their origin in or have been nurtured within the hub of networks of which London consists. What emerges, in Massey's work, is a new ethical understanding of both place and individual identity in relational space, which I hope provoke a deeper theological response to:

... questions of unequal interdependence, mutual constitution and the possibility of thinking of placed identity not as a claim to a place but as ***the acknowledgment of the responsibilities that inhere in being placed.*** (*World City*, Polity Press 2007, p.216) my emphasis.

42. The return to the 'good times' still seems the underlying expectation of both financial and political establishments, every twitch of the housing market is welcomed as a green shoot on the return to 'normality'. The opportunity for a different scenario for the world's poor has been driving many of those on the streets at the G20 and other occasions. Can a return to our old securities really be the driving vision for our cities? Are there trajectories or prospects that are cities are headed on that might stoppable?

43. The Archbishop of Canterbury's Christmas words spoke of some of the hope we might offer:

In the months ahead it will mean ... asking repeatedly what is asked of us locally to care for those who bear the heaviest burdens in the wake of our economic crisis – without waiting for the magical solution, let alone the return of the good times.

Conclusion

44. It has been an important three years for the support of urban mission and ministry. The advocacy of a bishop has opened doors and made it clear that the Church of England remains committed to a full participation in the future life of our towns and cities. As a parochially based church we must continue to take seriously '*the responsibilities that inhere in being placed*'. But this will only be possible if we adequately support the men and women who sustain our stipendiary presence in our neediest communities. It also means that the laity whom they serve are encouraged to feel that they are one of the Church's 'success' stories and not a burden 'carried by others'. We must continue to show that we have a contribution to make to the public debate about urban life founded on continued theological reflection. My hope is that the work will not be laid down but passed on.

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APPENDIX

Extracts taken from the Clergy Away Days Evaluation Sheets

It was helpful to hear other people's stories – the commonalities – the differences – the failures as well as the successes.

To be in a place where people understand the joys and sorrows of UPA inner city was liberating.

Very affirming and encouraging. It was wonderful to be in a non-competitive environment to share highs and lows without judgement but with acceptance.

An excellent opportunity to listen, to be affirmed in my own ministry – plenty of thoughts, reflections and ideas to take away. I'm sure new friendships have been made, as well as a whole new network of support and encouragement.

Uplifting, constructive, safe, relaxed place of reflection with people who would understand.

A vital opportunity, rarely available to reflect positively and constructively about our personal ministries and how they dovetail into the work of the wider church. No longer feel isolated.

It was a good opportunity to overcome some of the feelings of isolation inherent in UPA ministry and for such ministry, usually under resourced, to feel valued.

Real, healthy, refreshing, empowering.

Both affirming and challenging, an unusual combination, a privilege in providing such often moving insight into other lives and ministries and such sympathetic ears.

Absolutely brilliant. Very safe environment through careful planning.

Excellent, a very good opportunity to reflect on the practice of urban ministry and context.

It has been very helpful to come away and reflect on my own story and others. It has been a healthy mix of reflection, theology and humour. It has also encouraged me to hear what God is doing.

A refreshing honest, non competitive environment. There were, of course, the stories that were jaw dropping and depressing but far from being a “moaning shop” there was a great sense of inspiration and encouragement to keep on going.

The absence of value judgements and the fact that it is not appreciated in a line-management/employment sense is very important. As the C of E tendency towards “employment” increases, I sense it is vital that support should at points be separate from performance reviews!

There was a common thread of people feeling isolated which many people including myself have felt this event has helped to combat. I would like to see them continue giving support to clergy, many of whom arrive in such need and leave affirmed and valued.

This has been a turning point and it was only because of the sharing and space that I was able to see new perceptions of an ongoing situation by coming away from the familiar. Please keep enabling this for those who may benefit from it.

The best I have attended in 24 years of ministry. I was deeply moved just to be invited and now feel that the hard slog is appreciated.

The church as a whole would benefit from this supportive unpressured sharing – being “out of diocese” has meant that the feeling of being judged and assessed has not been present. Thereby encouraging freedom of expressions. A very worthwhile event.

Listening to all the “stories” gave me real hope for all involved in urban contexts and for the wider church we are indeed blessed by God for the dedication and witness of my fellow clergy as they witness in their community.

Unlike some, I am quite certain why I am here (at least I think so). When the Suffragan Bishop asked me “Is X a lonely place” I said “Yes”. I never expected that he would do anymore than note it in his book. I have already said thank you to him.

There was a gentleness about this conference which is hard to put into words. We’ve so bad at giving ourselves “permission” for time etc- this conference gave that. Thank you.

The whole event has been invaluable. It has come at a very important time in my ministry. What has been particularly helpful is to be able to reflect on my ministry and the context in which I work with others who work in similar situations. It was not only helpful to tell my story but also to listen to others. There is much to take away from the consultation. I feel affirmed, encouraged and also have a clearer idea of what I should be doing and the approach to be taking

The House of Bishops should be making these a priority. They should form part of the brief for +Stephen’s successor.

The event has been a breath of fresh air. It could have been depressing hearing others stories, but many have triumphed over adversity. Real death and resurrection situations are so encouraging. Having people who “speak the same language” in the main was very helpful.

We know Jesus was the Victory and will always triumph but nationally we are in denial of that, so it was good to have that reaffirmed in so many different ways.

A safe place to share our story is missing in all aspects of life where success is rated so highly and failure seen as so bad. Failure is an opportunity to learn and go forward if we are allowed to explore it with honesty and compassion. Jesus was in all of this and we could see the redemption process in action.