

This is one of a series of discussion papers dealing with current and controversial questions for the church in modern society, and primarily distributed with our quarterly newsletter. Our aim in these papers is to provoke debate and action. As such, the views and questions expressed herein are sometimes quite deliberately blunt and to the point, but do not necessarily represent the policy of Barnardo's.

The Church as a Grass-roots Urban Institution -- towards reconciling conservative and radical approaches to urban mission

Part One

Introduction

The radical image of urban mission

Urban mission in Britain has traditionally been a site for radical experiments in Christian mission. In Victorian times this was typified by the slum ritualism of Stuart Headlam and the brash evangelicalism of William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army. Both these worked in the East End of London. The radicalism has continued, some of it charted by Ken Leech, himself a successor to the Anglo-Catholic socialism of Stuart Headlam. Evangelical radicalism has also been kept alive in the East End, by groups such as Urban Expression pioneering new forms of Church planting in the area. To these have been brought very different new forms of radicalism especially by black Christian settlers in Hackney -- such as Matthew Ashimolowo's Kingsway International Church. This East London tradition has been well-documented and naturally connects with the radical theology that has been developed elsewhere in Britain through institutions such as the Urban Theology Unit in Sheffield and networks such as the Evangelical Coalition for Urban Mission. It has also drawn inspiration from the USA with figures such as Jim Wallis and Ched Myers reinforcing the radical cutting-edge of British urban mission.

All these initiatives and connections have constructed a radical narrative of urban mission which I was drawn to in the early 1980s through people like Jim Punton speaking at the Christian Arts Festival Greenbelt. Young Christians are drawn to live and work in urban areas, especially through volunteering programmes like Time for God. Many subsequently move on to leafier climes but a significant minority stay and become important leaders and activists. The urban has become the arena for their search for a more radical form of Christianity. But this is not the whole story, for they often encounter local churches which are far from radical and in many ways are deeply conservative.

The conservative reality

London is a dynamic and changing city. It has always been a port and its basic driving force has ever been the need to make money, whether that be Roman merchants haggling on the new Thames wharves or financiers watching computer screens in Threadneedle Street. The driving change brought about by capitalism has perhaps been most obviously seen in recent years in the rapidly growing tower blocks around Canary Wharf on the Isle of Dogs in London's East End. But change is everywhere apparent. Gentrification spruces up terraces in obscure parts of Hackney. Albanian is heard on the streets of

London as refugees arrive and seek to build new lives for themselves. Churches are transformed into mosques and temples as new religions make their presence felt.

In the intense rebuilding which characterised London in the post-war decades it was often churches which alone remained of the old London. People became attached to their churches as a sign of the eternal and unchanging in an environment which was experiencing relentless and constant change. Given this situation it is not surprising that the majority of London's churches have become essentially conservative institutions. This has expressed itself in many ways, some of the more significant have been:

A resistance to new immigrants. A majority of the new Caribbean immigrants to London in the 1950s had a strong Church background, but many churches resisted their integration into existing congregations. This encouraged the growth of the Pentecostal churches which had been brought over from the Caribbean. By the 1990s the traditional denominations had learned to be more welcoming to a new wave of African settlement, but a strong independent black majority Church was by now firmly established.

A tendency to be inward looking. Many churches found the changing London a threatening place and didn't understand why people no longer came to Church and did not appreciate their traditional liturgies. A desire to hold on to the past and existing institutions was a bulwark against complex change.

New churches were also conservative. The new black majority churches were also bulwarks against change. Strict moral codes and an all-encompassing church life were designed to protect their young people against the lure of the big city. Churches became a space where older and different values could be upheld and an alternative vision of life proclaimed.

This space which conservative churches have created has often been crucial for individuals looking for a way to survive and it should not be easily rejected, even if aspects of it such as its racism and liturgical inflexibility need challenging. It also needs emphasising how resilient these churches are -- they can often be tiny congregations in huge buildings relying on a small handful of committed members, but still they manage to survive. This is particularly notable in the context of the rapid turnover of tenants associations and community groups which typically characterises urban life in London, not to mention the fleeting waves of government initiatives!

The complex Church

Churches have, therefore, become uneasy alliances between essentially conservative institutions that are looking to hold onto a tried and tested formula, and a more radical and dynamic group -- often of incomers or younger people -- who see inner London as an ideal site for experiments in radical Christianity. The key is to find some way of bringing together the strengths of these two forces -- the resilience of the established institutions with the dynamism of youthful innovation.

The Grass-roots Urban Institution

Rooted in the urban

The most important thing about grassroots urban institutions is that they should be rooted in the urban. The grassroots urban institution emerges out of the flux of demanding urban communities intimately responding to that flux and expressing something of its nature. It is

possible for urban institutions to lose their urban roots -- in fact it is quite common and that is one of the dangers of taking the risk of institutional development rather than remaining in the flux of individual initiative and passing projects. Remaining rooted in the urban world, however, keeps the institution alive and able to go on changing

Conservative

Urban institutions are basically conservative. Given that urban mission tends to attract people with an interest in the radical it is not surprising that there is a resistance to the development of urban institutions. But a well rooted urban institution is conservative in a particular way. It resists superficial change in order to promote deep change. It maintains old ways of doing things because they are tried and tested and in so doing can be a testing ground for new innovations. It keeps the memory of the past so that the past can be a resource for the change of future. Where everything is changing the urban institution maintains continuity -- this is its great gift to the city.

Creating and maintaining space

The conservative urban institution holds and maintains the space in which new initiatives can develop. Very often this is an actual physical space -- a hall, an office, a playground where people can gather and organise. This space can be protected by the urban institution -- a low rent charged, basics such as maintenance looked after and the possibility to make mistakes protected. The urban institution by its very solidity and conservatism is rarely well-placed to do something truly innovative but one that is open and rooted is ideally placed to give other people a chance. The true grassroots urban institution does not feel threatened by the new, it may be a bit paternalistic and it may not really understand what is going on but it has seen many things come and go and is perfectly prepared to see new things come -- and if necessary let them go.

Holding stories

The urban institution is able to hold stories of its community. It has a long memory and keeps records of what went on in the past. Without an institution at its centre a community tends to forget its past and lose touch with its own stories. The institution is a place where the stories are told and kept as a resource for a community. The institution will have its own story but that can often become rather bland after the exciting early years, but it is the stories told in and around the institution that can keep you in touch with the new and radical developments. Without an institution it can be difficult to find out what's happening in a community as everyone is intent upon doing their new and radical thing rather than relating to other people. A grassroots urban institution is a place for networking.

Long-lasting

An urban institution takes at least 20 years to develop. It takes this long to develop credibility and a belief in itself that it will survive. It takes this long to become boring and off the cutting edge! Urban institutions require a stability of funding - if they are always financially on the edge then they have to keep on being innovative and never develop the conservative traits that define them as institutions rather than just long established projects.

Community leadership

An urban institution is most successful when it is owned by its community -- not necessarily physically owned and managed, but owned in people's imaginations. The urban institution is then in a position to take on a role of community leadership, especially when the community is under threat or is in some kind of crisis. In fact, people will

naturally turn to the institution and that perhaps is the best indicator that the urban project has indeed become an urban institution. The urban institution may at times be resented, envied or seen as having sold out, but that is part of the process of becoming embedded in the community and concerned with something more fundamental than being at the cutting edge.

Value based

Urban institutions are not rational bureaucracies although they need to be well organised. They are rooted in a set of coherent values which inspires and sustains them, it enables them to survive even when they aren't being successful or when they face the crises which are inevitable for any organisation rooted in the flux of the city. As I researched urban institutions the importance of a strong value based became more obvious to me especially as I saw how many urban institutions had a religious basis.

Urban institutions become symbols for their community. This is why it can be important for them to have a noticeable and prominent building -- one which is unavoidable and always reminding people of where they live.

Urban institutions survive in the complex city by developing strong protective resources and acquiring the ability to endure. They are successful when they enable people to co-operate. They resist the pressures of competition and become a space where people can meet and with speed and cunning respond to the opportunities that the city throws up. I believe that without urban institutions there can be urban places but there can be no urban communities¹.

This discussion paper will be continued in the next issue -- looking in more depth at the church as a grass-roots urban institution.

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If you want to respond to any of the above points, or follow-up any of the ideas, please do get in touch with us at CANDL.

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¹ It is currently fashionable to describe universities and other large institutions as 'urban institutions'. While there seems to me some value in this idea it is very different from my description of grassroots urban institutions. The key idea behind urban institutions seems to be the need to *engage* with the city in which the urban institutions placed, this is not an issue for grassroots urban institutions for they *emerge* out of the city.