

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

Part Two

A description of churches as grassroots urban institutions

I want to develop these ideas in a description of how church functions as a grassroots urban institution. It is important to recognise that this is not a model of how church should be, or a description of how the church is. Rather it is an attempt to describe a pattern that has emerged out of the complex and chaotic life of London as I have experienced it. I will be drawing, especially, on a paper written in 1984 by John Shelby Spong, then Bishop of Newark, New Jersey¹.

The value base of urban churches

“But the central rite of Christian worship is the sacrament of communion: people gather to be fed at the table of the Lord. Sunday after Sunday Christians break bread and drink wine together, symbolically proclaiming that the church is a community where food, heavenly and earthly, is available. A community that calls its Lord the bread of life creates a symbolic meal, the Eucharist, which quite naturally overflows into other feeding ministries, such as soup kitchens and food pantries. Activities to feed the hungry grow out of our Eucharist; they can never replace it or be a substitute for it.”

This kind of comment is commonplace in urban church circles. Most urban church practitioners find it necessary to place worship at the centre of their work. But why is worship so central?

Margaret Harris's interesting book *Organising God's Work*² is constantly tussling with the religious dimension of church life as she seeks to see the church from a organisational point-of-view. She recognises that religion makes congregations different from voluntary associations but perhaps does not address sufficiently the strength gained from a religious point of view. This strength is rooted in worship: the recognition of a higher power, of a revealed authority, of hope beyond death and struggle. Worship is what enables congregations to survive and continue once they have hit the down cycle. When a project reaches the end of its useful life it closes down, the church on the other hand simply goes to sleep for a while -- hibernating until the new spring arrives and it can draw on the reserves laid down in years of plenty to again become active in its community. During this hibernation it is the regular practice of worship that keeps the church open. Worship keeps churches going when everything else seems pointless. Of course worship is still

¹ John Shelby Spong, "The Urban Church: Symbol and Reality", *Christian Century*, September 12-19, 1984, p.828

² Margaret Harris, *Organising God's Work*, London England, MacMillan Press Ltd 1998

important even when things are going well and projects and initiatives are multiplying, but its role is seen more clearly in times of struggle and difficulty.

Conservatism, patience and continuity

“The Christian church must stay in the city not because it can solve all the problems that city life raises, though it dare not ignore those problems. We must stay in the city not because we can bring about all of the political, economic and social changes needed, though we must never cease to labor toward those goals. But our primary vocation in the city is simply to be the church, a community of self-conscious Christians. The church is a presence, an outpost of the Kingdom of God, a light in the darkness which the darkness can never extinguish or overwhelm. Our vocation is to be ourselves.”

Spong here emphasises the church as presence and it is perhaps the dimension of the church which is most central to the church as a grassroots urban institution. Being present for a long time in one place has any number of unpredictable outcomes. The church becomes part of the identity of the place, particularly through its building. But presence on its own can simply be witness to a moribund church which is turned in on itself and is slowly dissolving. Presence only becomes meaningful when it is connected with some kind of action, however small. A piece of youth work, a toddler group, the use of church buildings by tenants association all begin to make links with the community. When these are connected to a person(s) who is identified as coming from the church then the presence becomes real rather than ideal. Nonetheless by holding on to buildings and urban space churches retain it as potential community space for the benefit of all, rather than it being used to enrich the pockets of developers or the megalomania of local authorities. There is the ever present danger of slipping into a moribund culture which cannot be renewed but even moribund churches retain hope if they hold onto the buildings. The death of a moribund congregation has often led to new life in the old premises.

Enabling and making space for the new

“In the city, where finding adequate and safe housing is a constant concern, it is as a house -- a house of God -- that the church makes its witness. It needs to be present as all of the things that housing means to people: a sanctuary, a shelter, a haven, a refuge, a protected womb, an ark to carry us through the storm. Although the church has neither the power nor the resources to solve urban housing problems, it can be a welcoming home to the homeless, a house to those who have been burned out, a haven to those who are cold. It can be the house of last appeal when other housing structures fail, the house of God to those who seek an adequate home.”

Spong's focus on the Church as the house of God reminds us of the importance of providing space. This is, perhaps, the key activity of grassroots urban institutions. The church which provides space for its community is likely to be well rooted in its community. Sometimes, of course, this can be nothing more than a financial transaction whereby the church is kept afloat by rents from the karate club. This is not what I mean by providing space, or what Spong means by being the house of God. These more theological actions require hospitality whereby the church provides a genuine welcome. Not only is physical space provided but the work going on in the space is blessed and enabled. The example of this which remains most vividly in my mind is a church of which I was a member, welcoming two women from the neighbouring estate who wanted to set up a tenants

association. This seems, somehow, more significant than the much more major endeavour of providing beds for hundreds of Kurdish refugees with which I was involved in 1990. Maybe this is because it was more than just the response to a crisis but rather a response to a long-standing issue in the community. Perhaps it was this event which sowed the idea of a grassroots urban institution in my mind.

Assuming community leadership

Spong does not talk about churches assuming a role of community leadership. Maybe he is rightly concerned about the paternalistic history of churches assuming they have a right to be leaders in urban communities and it is certainly true that churches should not believe they are divinely appointed to be leaders in their community. They can only assume leadership when they have earned the right so to do and then take it on as an act of service for people who, at least implicitly, have asked them to take on the role. It is perhaps easier for churches that have really emerged out of the community to take on community leadership. This would appear to be happening in Haringey Peace Alliance³ where faith leaders, especially from the black majority churches, have taken on the issue of gun crime and provided one of the few credible community responses. They are perhaps, in some small way, following in the footsteps of Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu in taking on leadership when there was no one else to do it. It is of course a role with great dangers but nonetheless sometimes there is a time to step forward and take the risk of being a leader.

The church as a symbol

“The symbolic presence of the city church is necessary to the cause of Christ -- and, since necessary, worthy of the support and the investment of time, talent and treasure of all the people of God. We are the church of the incarnate Lord who so loved the world that he was born into our human life, his presence turning a common stable into a majestic shrine. His life transformed a cross of execution into a symbol of resurrection. Because we serve this Lord, the Christian church is a symbolic presence that can turn the despair of the city into hope, the ugliness of the city into beauty, the destructive power of the city into redemption and the fearful fire of the city into cleansing truth.”

Grassroots urban institutions can, at their most profound, become symbols for their community. Churches with their towering architecture often acquire this status, although its impact can be double edged. The Anglican Church on the Winstanley estate in Battersea where I lived burned down some years previously, leaving only the spire remaining. It remained as a lone Victorian symbol, dwarfed by Sporle Court a tower block named after a local councillor who had pushed through the redevelopment of Battersea -- and lined his pockets in the process! One day a brick fell from the spire and it was immediately wreathed in scaffolding. Much debate and discussion with the local council and English Heritage followed but eventually the tower was pulled down as money for its restoration could not be found. The loss of a symbol, however, produced an unpredictable response in *Private Eye* -- of all places⁴. The church was lambasted for wanting to remove the symbolic spire with unseemly haste -- when in fact the church was doing everything it could including spending £20,000 on scaffolding to save the spire. You never quite know what impact symbols are going to have -- or how becoming a symbolic presence is going

³ <http://www.peacealliance.org.uk/>

⁴ *Private Eye* is a satirical magazine

to curtail your freedom of action for as John Van Eenwyk⁵ says "symbols connect us with something beyond everyday awareness... The exact nature of this something, however, is a matter of dispute". Symbols destabilise us because their exact meaning is not easy to pin down -- they launch us into a chaotic world where things are not clear-cut but nonetheless have meanings which resonate deeply within us.

The development of a grassroots urban institution

My present church: Clapton Park URC in Hackney is suggestive to me of what a grassroots urban institution is like in reality. I don't offer it as a shining example for everyone to follow but merely as the example that I know best of a phenomenon which I commonly encounter. The church is 200 years old, founded by Pye Smith an important nonconformist theologian in the early 19th century. In the 1870s it built a large church in the new suburb of Hackney called the Round Chapel which has been dubbed the nonconformist cathedral of North London. In the 20th century the church underwent a steady decline, common to many inner-city churches until it became unable to sustain the huge thousand-seater Round Chapel. At this point it looked as if the church might cease to exist but eventually a scheme was developed where the church was taken over by Hackney Historic Buildings Trust and the church continued in the refurbished schoolrooms. This sparked a rejuvenation in the fortunes of the church and it took a central role in the gentrification of the area. It developed a number of social projects particularly a well-respected nursery and became a meeting place through the institution of a monthly community meal which particularly attracted sections of Hackney's alternative community. The morning service also revived becoming a modest but sustainable multicultural congregation and an alternative evening congregation was started which has attracted a group of young white professionals and artists. The church has also been able to host space for a number of community projects. Much of this was facilitated by the provision, through the national church, of a community worker with a ten-year brief to develop the community ministry of the church. But it has also been crucial that the small number of long-established members have been willing to host and support the social projects and alternative initiatives both through their goodwill and financial backing.

Clapton Park has been willing to provide space for new initiatives -- some have fallen by the wayside such as the local community shop, but that is only to be expected, others such as the evening congregation have begun to die only to be revitalised in a new form. There are still many issues for the church to face, it is working out how to establish its financial sustainability and issues will be raised when the community worker comes to the end of his ten-year funding. There are also questions to be raised about its symbiotic relationship with gentrification and whether this has hindered it engaging with the profound poverty which surrounds it -- especially in the housing estates which are nearby but on the edge of its immediate neighbourhood. We can thus identify the following factors as instrumental in the development of Clapton Park URC as a grassroots urban institution:

- Its long history in the area -- it has been present since its urbanisation and before.
- The reordering of its building into a usable format
- The openness of existing long-established members to host new initiatives
- The provision of space in many different ways
- Its integration with particular themes and groups in the community i.e. the alternative community and gentrification
- Its continuing emphasis on worship and the articulation of Christian values

⁵ John R. Van Eenwyk, *Archetypes and Strange Attractors: the chaotic world of symbols*, Toronto Canada, Inner-city Books, 1997

Another church that I know of was in a similar position to rebuild itself as a grass-roots urban institution but some key differences can be noted

- The national Church did not bring in any additional resources but rather the regional structures imposed unimaginative control of new initiatives
- The long established local leadership had doubts about the opening up of the church to community initiatives -- they allowed space to be used but did not embrace what was happening
- The building remained out of date and was not refurbished

This illustrates that grassroots urban institutions do not just happen, they require the right mix at the grassroots but they also require important decisions to be made by forces outside the local situation. Just as grassroots urban institutions can give space to local radical initiatives so national and regional structures can help or hinder the emergence of grassroots urban institutions.

Conclusion: nurturing grass-roots urban institutions

The grassroots urban institution therefore gives us a way of affirming two apparently contradictory impulses in urban mission: the desire to be radical and innovative and the tendency for urban churches to be conservative bulwarks in an ever-changing city. The grassroots urban institution is conservative -- it seeks to hold onto what is good from the past, it is focused on self-preservation and continuity. Nonetheless it does not seek to do this by extracting itself from its urban context rather it seeks to perpetuate itself thoroughly within this context, precisely because it understands that the city is an ever-changing flux which needs spaces of continuity and stability -- places which provide the space for the new and innovative to happen. It is not bedazzled by the new and innovative but neither is it afraid of them -- it knows that they need to happen but also that it is not necessary to immediately and completely embrace what they are saying and doing. All that is needed is to provide them with the space to learn their own lessons and do their own thing.

To end I consider a few ways in which grassroots urban institutions can be nurtured. Firstly by those who are responsible for the strategic promotion of mission.

- Seek to hold on to urban real estate. It might feel like a frustrating heap of bricks at the moment but that space and the history it represents has the potential to be a space where exciting things happen.
- Take the long view. Grassroots urban institutions do not emerge overnight they take years to develop and there will be times when it doesn't look as if they aren't going anywhere. Avoid the demand for instant results at all costs.
- Recognise the role of transitional ministry. A high profile ministry which is seen as being successful often depends on the struggles of a predecessor who has laid the foundations for the development of a grassroots urban institution

Established local leadership has a crucial role in facilitating the development of grassroots urban institutions, even when their capacity for direct mission seems limited.

- Develop the skill of maintaining the traditional institution whilst being actively welcoming of new initiatives -- don't worry if you don't understand them!
- Develop your buildings as flexible spaces with worship at the heart -- home to a diverse range of activities and not dominated by one project which controls the space.

- Don't try and keep control of everything but encourage people to develop their own visions

Entrepreneurs and activists need grassroots urban institutions to provide the space for their new initiatives but they also have a role to play in supporting the institutions on which they depend

- Value the institutions which give you the opportunity and space to develop your initiatives
- Continue to support and resource the institutions in your community even when they may not seem as radical or progressive as you would like
- Don't worry when your project seems to becoming less radical and progressive -- maybe it's transmuting into a grassroots urban institution!
- Give new ideas the space which you wish you had been given when you were starting out.

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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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