SO YESTERDAY

Urban Ministry
25 Years On From Faith In The City

A Sabbatical Reflection

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Contents

Introduction

When I was ordained in 1985 the Church of England was poised to publish perhaps the seminal church report of the past half a century. Faith In The City hit the public arena in December of that year, sending shockwaves through the political establishment, and propelling the Church of England into the urban spotlight.

The legacy of Faith In The City was substantial – for the nation, and for the Church. It has been reviewed and analysed repeatedly over the years, and it is not my purpose to add to that analysis. What interests me is this: in the 1980s, Faith In The City defined the identity of the Church of England, it set ministry in deprived urban areas as the priority around which everything else needed to align. Over the past 25 years, despite the development of the regeneration industry and the investment of billions of pounds of public money, all the indicators are that the poverty gap in the UK has grown wider and many people in our most deprived inner city areas have been reduced to what Philip Blond describes as "a modern form of serfdom" (Philip Blond, Red Tory, p138). Yet, in parallel to that movement, urban ministry appears to have dropped below the radar of the Church of England.

This is not to decry the work of the Commission for Urban Life and Faith, or the extraordinary ministry of Stephen Lowe as Bishop for Urban Life and Faith, or the focus of the Urban Bishops' Panel, or the contribution of the Board for Mission and Public Affairs – all of which have kept the urban flame burning. It is simply to observe that urban ministry no longer appears to be the 'priority' that it was 25 years ago. It has become, in the words of an un-named senior member of the clergy, "so yesterday".

Why should this be? If urban poverty was the divine priority 25 years ago, and things have only got worse, why is it not seen as a priority today?

When CULF published 'Faithful Cities' in 2006, despite the many strengths and insights of that report it was received with a mixture of criticism and disinterest. Does this imply that sociologically, theologically and ecclesiologically the Church of England has moved on? And, if so, what are the implications of this, when in reality the gap between rich and poor is widening?

Does the loss of an urban agenda betray a weariness with an un-winnable struggle? Have we turned a cynical and blind eye to the growing inequalities within UK society, abandoning our prophetic call to take the side of the poor, in our anxiety for our own survival and our increasing absorption with internal politics?

The questions keep coming. Have we simply given up? Have we lost our urban nerve in the face of the seemingly intractable problems of the inner cities and outer estates? Why are we fiddling tunes of gender and sexuality while Rome burns? And how might we re-imagine urban mission and ministry for the church 25 years on from Faith In The City?

The Church of England's persistent emphasis on suburban or rural models has long struck me as odd. The Bible begins in a garden and ends in a city – and in that movement we can trace the trend of human socialisation away from a rural towards an urban context (strikingly, over 90% of the UK's population is now urban). But we can also begin to acknowledge the significance of cities in Christian theology, and recognise that Scripture's vision of heaven is not rural, or suburban, but unashamedly urban. In the face of this the church needs to re-think its increasing emphasis on suburban living.

These are the questions whose surface I have scratched in my sabbatical. I am well aware of the absurd limitations of what I have done. With every visit I have made, it is as if I have turned a corner to discover half a dozen new avenues to explore. Passing them by unexamined has been an inevitable and frustrating consequence of the brevity of my time and opportunity.

This journey has not been undertaken with a view to writing up a definitive account of the state of urban ministry in the UK. That task has been well served by the publication of Elaine Graham and Stephen Lowe's 'What Makes A Good City?', and more recently 'Crossover City' (edited by Andrew Davey), 2 books which, taken together, offer a terrific insight into the urban issues and challenges facing the Church of England.

But I owe it to those who have enabled me to make this journey – colleagues at the Cathedral, funders, and the many people who have given up their time so generously to speak with me – to provide an account of what I have found and how I think the land lies.

This is not a piece of academic research. I visited 15 of the most urban dioceses in England, and conducted 46 interviews and visits with a variety of Bishops, Urban Officers, clergy and lay people (see Appendix A). My methodology – if you can call it that – has been one of conversation, anecdote and story. It is far from comprehensive, and the omissions will be glaringly obvious to anyone with any knowledge of the urban landscape. My observations are more akin to journal entries, my conclusions at times shallow and un-tested.

For all that, it has been an extraordinary privilege to take time out to explore these issues, and I hope I will have unearthed the odd nugget that merits further exploration.

It has been a very personal journey. For 20 years prior to my current post I ministered within parishes designated as some of Faith In The City's "Urban priority Areas". Faith In The City was my motivation and inspiration for ministry, and in many ways continues to be so. I would love to see a new renaissance of urban mission within the Church of England, and I offer what follows as a small contribution to realising that hope.

1985 – 2010: Faith In The City and the Disappearance of an Urban Agenda

Faith In The City emerged within a very different political, social and economic landscape from today. Sparked by civil unrest in a number of inner city areas, it challenged the apparent indifference of the Government to the growing inequalities within UK society and the way in which the price of economic restructuring was being paid disproportionately by the urban poor.

Its 61 recommendations – 23 to the nation and 38 to the church – were based on a conviction that the state of our cities is a litmus test of justice and equity within society as a whole, alongside the insight from liberation theology that God has a 'bias to the poor'.

Faith In The City's lasting impact on the country reflected the fact that it was one of the most robust and politically literate reports to emerge from the Church of England. The absence of any effective political opposition at the time, the authenticity of the report's methodology (serious empirical research combined with a deep commitment to receive and value voices and perspectives which were rarely heard in public debate), and the timing of its publication – in the autumn days of the Church of England's ability to speak with credibility as a voice for the nation – meant that it was profoundly influential in changing the direction of social policy.

Once the initial hiatus had died down (who can forget Norman Tebbitt's accusation of Faith In The City as 'Marxist', a charge rarely laid at the door of the Church of Englan d before or since), its arguments and recommendations slowly began to be appropriated and quietly elided into much of subsequent urban policy.

The impact on the church was no less powerful. The fact that it bore the imprimatur of the Archbishop of Canterbury was vital – this was the church taking a strong lead from the avowed priority of its spiritual leader. Perhaps this helps to explain why the report, in the words of one of my episcopal interviewees, was *"written from the margins but appropriated by the centre"* of the Church of England.

That 'appropriation' largely centred around the creation of the Church Urban Fund. Despite the fact that an impressive number of the report's recommendations to the Church of England were taken up and implemented (pp 361-4 of the report makes interesting reading today), in most people's minds it is the Church Urban Fund that defines the church's response to Faith In The City.

For all of the Church Urban Fund's undoubted achievements (and these are many and varied), it offered the Church of England a 'get-out-of-jail-free' card, a way of avoiding some of Faith In The City's more challenging dimensions.

The Church Urban Fund became our strategic response to Faith In The City. This was no bad thing in itself, because for a time it concentrated the mind of the church and made sure that the word 'priority' in Urban Priority Areas counted for something, at least on our balance sheet.

But, perhaps inevitably, the focus on the Church Urban Fund meant that the truly radical elements of Faith In The City – in particular the vapours of liberation theology that periodically erupted from below the surface of the report – were quietly forgotten. There was an opportunity, afforded us by Faith In The City, to radically re-imagine the Church of England as *"standing for justice in a way which may lead to our own disadvantage"* (David Sheppard, prologue to his revision of Built As A City, and published at the same time as Faith In The City), but instead we opted for a form of 'salvation by projects' and the moment passed us by.

There are many ways to understand this. It is clear that, historically, Faith In The City emerged immediately prior to three seismic shifts that have changed the context for urban policy ever since:

1. The triumph of neo-capitalism
2. Globalisation (and multiculturalism)
3. The communications revolution.

Of these, the fall of the Berlin Wall, which heralded the collapse of communism and the 'triumph' of capitalism, exerted arguably the strongest influence of them all.

The disappearance of any form of broadly Marxist analysis from mainstream economics has had a profound effect on the establishment of a new set of cultural 'norms' in society the world over. It has changed the whole language of the prevailing culture, as a form of neo-capitalism has established itself as the dominant ideology. Therefore the 'lens' through which Faith In The City saw and understood the world all but disappeared within a few short years of its publication.

The church, like the rest of society, got caught up in the curve of this wave in a fairly unquestioning way. Just as the spectrum of political thought narrowed towards the centre, so the church also lost its radical edge.

But in part the avoidance of Faith In The City's more radical dimension was also due to its very success in changing urban policy. As successive Governments invested in a Regeneration agenda (on the back of two decades of economic growth) so the opportunities for 'partnership' within this agenda came along thick and fast. Set against the declining influence of the Church of England in the public square, it is only natural that the church should have clutched at this chance to flex its muscles and make a difference – which it did, and which it continues to do, often to extremely good effect.

So it is probably true to say that the church's overwhelming response to Faith In The City was to invest in the Church Urban Fund and enter into partnerships, but in so doing we managed to leave the power relationships in the church unchanged. As such, the radical nature of Faith In The City never really entered the DNA of the church.

This is not to say that its impact has been minimal, far from it. There is some wonderful work going on in our inner cities and outer estates, and the Church of England continues to be an impressive force for good in the very places from which many secular organisations and other denominations have withdrawn. Much of this work is down to Faith In The City and its legacy, and I have been both surprised and delighted at the quality of clergy and laity who retain a clear sense of calling to such areas. Without a shadow of a doubt, if the church suddenly absented itself from these parishes, the social fabric of the whole country would experience the shockwaves.

But when 'Faithful Cities' attempted to recapture a focus on urban ministry in 2006, it flickered briefly and then almost died without trace, just another report to be digested by General Synod and then, effectively, ignored. 'Faithful Cities' emerged in a very different context, it was written in buoyant economic circumstances and in language that Local Authorities could understand (one of my interviewees said of 'Faithful Cities', *"it was so secular it could have been written by Christian Aid"*!). But its influence on the Church and Society has been negligible.

It is not just that things have changed – they clearly have, in so many ways, and these have been documented helpfully by for example Contact 152, What Makes A Good City, Chapter 2, and indeed by Faithful Cities itself, Chapter 2 – but that the changed landscape of urban life and ministry no longer appears to be on the radar of the Church of England's national agenda.

This appears to be part of a broader problem within the Church of England. Over the past 25 years we seem to have turned in on ourselves, lost confidence in who we are and what we have to contribute, and have therefore significantly disengaged with the public square.

The meta-narrative of the Anglican Communion is currently one of division and dissent – we are known (and despised) by others for a focus on gender and sexuality, and so much of the wider contribution of the Church of England to the social fabric of our country (highlighted for instance in a report like 'Moral But No Compass') goes ignored or unseen.

The anxious, self-obsessed introversion of the church is part of the explanation for a lack of strategic attention to urban life and ministry. But it has dropped down the list of priorities for the Church of England for another reason – the rise of a Growth Agenda.

The Growth Agenda

For the Church of England, the Eighties was the decade of Faith In The City, the Nineties was the Decade of Evangelism, and the Noughties was the decade of Fresh Expressions and the 'mixed economy'.

For 20 years we have been focused on halting (and reversing) decline. This has been a period in which the church has become increasingly inward-looking (some would say self-obsessed), concerned at its marginalisation within mainstream society and worried about its declining numbers.

It is hard to escape the fact that in 2010, the priority agenda for the Church of England as a national institution appears to be 'Growth'. Like motherhood and apple pie, it is hard to argue against this, but honest questions need to be asked of it.

When I published the first draft of a strategic plan for St Martin in the Bull Ring in 1997, a year after arriving there as Rector, I held a number of consultation meetings with groups inside and outside the church. The most challenging of these was with St Martin's 'social responsibility' group, who put a question to me that changed the direction of that plan and has influenced my thinking ever since: Is this about saving the world, or saving the Church?

The problem – potentially, at least – with a Growth Agenda is that the driver behind it is an unacknowledged priority to save the church.

There are only two good reasons that I can see for a Growth Agenda. One is so that the church can be sustained and strengthened (presumably a good thing) and the other is so that souls can be saved.

The latter reflects a particular theological understanding of salvation in which conversion to Christ opens the door to heaven and eternal life for believers, and in which unbelief closes it (the consequences of which vary from damnation to oblivion depending on which shade of this belief you hold to). The Church of England as a whole contains many people who would adopt this sort of theological position, but also many who would not – therefore a growth agenda predicated on a 'saving souls' basis is hard to argue for the Church of England as a whole.

That leaves the desire to strengthen and sustain the church. At one level this looks like a desperate attempt to shore up a dying institution, which could become very undignified and not at all effective. Alternatively, a growth agenda based on sustaining and

strengthening the church will be attractive to those who see the church as a force for good in society and a net contributor to human flourishing.

But if this is the only good reason for the Church of England adopting a Growth Agenda then it comes significantly close to an altogether different agenda, that of being the church for the nation, which might be defined as civil reach, and engagement with the public square. But that agenda may not lead to growth at all – in fact a number of people I spoke to used the analogy that the church in the inner cities may have to lose itself to find itself, to disappear in order to be true to its calling. This idea, based on the theological and Christological notion of kenosis, suggests that we are called as a church to 'give ourselves away'. It is a counter-intuitive calling for the church, not necessarily to grow and be strong but to be faithful.

Lying at the back of this discussion is a concern that the church has prioritised a Growth Agenda at precisely the same time that capitalism has won the global economic war. The fall of communism in 1989 is a key factor in the changed environment we find ourselves in today. Now, capitalism is the only answer, a solution emphasised by 20 years of world economic growth but suddenly brought into a different light by Recession.

What is the defining mark of a capitalist narrative of the world? Growth. This parallel development seems too much of a coincidence, and makes me deeply suspicious that we may have been seduced uncritically into prioritising an agenda which is being carried on the prevailing cultural, social and philosophical breeze of our day.

Is the Church's preoccupation with numerical growth a parallel to the world's preoccupation with economic growth? We legitimise the former because we assume saving the church is the way to save the world; we legitimise the latter because we assume increasing standards of living are a good thing. Neither may be correct!

These questions about economic growth have been brought to the fore by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's recently published book 'The Spirit Level', which openly challenges the assumed link between economic growth and a society's well-being. In their view, economic growth has come to the end of the road in its ability to deliver a flourishing society – not only does it produce steadily diminishing returns, but where it involves a tendency to produce greater levels of inequality it will have a detrimental effect on every single indicator of well-being within that society.

Now even Prince Charles is questioning our commitment as a society to more and more growth, more and more consumption (reported in The Times 10/6/10). As a church we need to be brave (and self-aware) enough to ask ourselves the same questions. Part of the

opportunity of the current time is to challenge and question our preoccupation with Growth – and maybe relate this to the Church's Growth Agenda at the same time.

A growth agenda can be justified if it is about saving the world, but saving the world cannot simply be about growing the church.

This is a general point about our mission and ministry, but there is a more specific aspect to this where urban ministry is concerned. The impact of a growth agenda on urban ministry must be carefully thought through if it is not to prove counter-productive to the church's main agenda of saving the world.

It is clearly harder to grow the church numerically in areas of urban deprivation than it is in suburban (and sometimes rural) situations. All of the people I interviewed are high-calibre ministers of huge ability, but their churches were not always growing in numerical terms (some were, but often from a very low base). The 'standard' growth formula of growing suburban churches rarely works in deprived parishes, where confident and able lay leadership is scarce, upward mobility robs churches of their asset bases, and the dysfunctionality of everyday living means that congregations contain a significant number of very needy individuals.

Allied to this, areas of urban deprivation are often hot-houses of cultural diversity, not simply multi-faith but often challenging the cultural norms. While this dimension can make urban ministry exciting and exhilarating, it is not the sort of ground that the Church of England has traditionally found fertile for numerical growth.

Experienced inner city church planters like Juliet Kilpin and Stuart Murray, writing from an evangelical (and pro-growth) perspective, point to numerous inhibitors to growth in even the most vital and vibrant inner city churches (Church Planting in the Inner City pp12-14). Even someone like Peter Robinson, a highly effective and imaginative urban minister (now Archdeacon of Lindisfarne), has argued that effective, witnessing inner city churches might nonetheless fail to grow, due to factors that are external to church life. He argues for qualitative rather than quantitative goals to be pursued for the inner city.

This is about the importance of location within contextual theology. Networked, homogenous communities (which make up a large proportion of the 'Fresh Expressions' network) allow people to opt out of locational responsibilities. Therefore approaches to mission that focus on network communities may be <u>effective</u> but they might be seriously <u>deficient</u> – and an emphasis on Growth will be misguided if it adopts models of homogeneity, because what we 'grow' might not be a fully authentic expression of a Christian church in an urban world.

The Presence and Engagement network has attempted to express an alternative dimension to the church's role in urban areas, reflecting the fact that 'faithfulness' may be a better aim than 'success' within the urban landscape.

The phrase 'Presence & Engagement' has largely emerged out of the experience of Dioceses with a strong multi-faith dimension (hence the 'centres' in London, Leicester and Bradford) but the two 'poles' of Presence and Engagement are a rich seam to mine for all urban ministry.

'Presence' remains a core value for just about every Diocese and parish I visited. The Church of England appears to value the concept of Presence, expressed in its commitment to 'mutuality' and redistributive funding. How far this commitment will survive the pressures of funding is open to question (see my next section), but for now it remains a wonderfully stubborn and resistant aspect of the Church of England's identity.

The concept of Engagement is trickier to pin down. Faithful Cities has a lot on Partnerships (are they good or bad?) but engagement will involve a lot more than this. Faithful Cities wrestled with how compromised the church can be through partnerships, and some people I interviewed felt it was better for the church to find its own voice again. But others had a different perspective, seeing the need for the church to 'lose itself' in urban areas, give up power and influence, and let go of historic privilege – in order to become 'leaven' in local communities.

This is linked to another emerging theme, that the traditional priest/people model is insufficient, and genuine Engagement in the inner city will be done through a more 'mutual' and collaborative/collegial community. All of the urban clergy I spoke to emphasised the vital role of their small and struggling congregations – worshipping communities provide the continuity, transcendence, and committed relationships out of which genuine transformative presence and engagement can happen.

Nicholas Holtham, in his contribution to Contact 152's analysis of Faithful Cities, quotes Bishop Kenneth Kirk's saying that *"it is not that conduct is the end of life and worship helps it, but that worship is the end of life and conduct tests it"* (Contact 152, p28). The faithful and imaginative worship of many small inner city congregations, engaged as it often is with the real issues of urban life, may carry greater consequential weight that we can ever imagine.

In truth the choice should never be between Growth and Presence/Engagement – both are important, and the church's ministry is most effective where both are pursued in parallel.

There are some signs that these two 'twin polarities' are becoming reconnected, a development that I will return to when I look at issues of church and tradition.

But in the course of my sabbatical journey a nagging concern grew within me – that the emphasis on Growth might have a doubly-negative impact on the Church's ministry in urban areas. The inability of many urban parishes to meet the expectations of a growth agenda could be compounded by the concentration of resources in the hands of a growth constituency that becomes increasingly disconnected from the realities of urban ministry. This leads me into a consideration of money and the Church's funding mechanisms.

Money and Mutuality

Having sat on the national group tasked with reviewing the Church Commissioners' spending plans for the next triennium, I am well aware of the financial challenges facing the Church of England as we emerge from recession. There is much to celebrate in the Church of England's continuing commitment to 'mutuality', and its desire to maintain an effective Christian presence in the toughest areas of the country. Indeed I was struck with some force by the absence of many other denominations from the inner cities and outer estates that I visited – despite the challenges, the Church of England (and often the Roman Catholic church) is still there.

But this commitment to mutuality – expressed both by the diocesan quota systems which are all broadly redistributive in their approach, and the Church Commissioners' allocation via Archbishop's Council, which while redistributive in intention can still be applied regressively at the discretion of individual Diocesan Boards of Finance (a weakness I believe needs to be addressed) – will undoubtedly come under increasing threat over the new few years.

There was a sense among everybody I spoke to that these redistributive and 'mutual' commitments may weaken as various factors affect the direction of travel:-

- tightening belts – the effects of the recession are likely to be regressive, reducing the levels of share collected and therefore making less available for redistribution. Many collection rates are well below 90% in a number of urban dioceses already.

- growth and success – as the continuing decline in numbers concentrates the collective mind of the Church of England and drives policy, people will increasingly question the viability of 'failing' parishes; and an 'outcomes' approach to funding will favour ministry in areas/parishes where results are more easily achieved.

- congregationalism – how far a primary commitment to mutuality can be maintained against a background of strengthening congregationalism is open to question.

- theological division – the hardening of theological arteries in the Church of England will inevitably restrict the flow of goodwill around the bloodstream of the parish system. Given that urban ministry tends to have softer theological and ecclesiological edges (because people are exposed to many different types

of 'other' and it becomes harder to maintain pure intellectual positions on most subjects), the more that funding power is held by theological fundamentalists (of all persuasions) the less attractive the urban parishes will become.

The challenge to maintain a strong commitment to the poor, while at the same time avoiding the charge of 'subsidising decline', will not be an easy one to meet. As the Church of England becomes more 'intentional' in its approach to funding, the danger is that a Growth Agenda will lead to a culture of quantifiable targets, outputs and outcomes, far more easily met by the suburban churches.

Guarding against this will entail a sophisticated approach to the impact of our various funding streams. 'Growth' – if that is to be the driver – will need to be carefully (and prayerfully) defined, to include what I would call 'grasp' as well as 'reach'. That is to say, what may be important is not bigger numbers but better impact on the life of our nation, neighbourhoods and social structures.

The Diocese of Liverpool is currently adopting a creative approach to measuring growth in ways that transcend the numerical. Called 'Living Hopefully', it is an attempt to measure numbers, finance, connectivity, engagement and local impact in a rounded way. At the time of writing it remains at the planning stage, but it will be an important initiative to watch for the future.

As a member of the Spending Plans Review Group it struck me that the so-called 'Darlow' formula for distributing funding to the Dioceses, while redistributive in intention, is fairly unsophisticated in its approach to deprivation indices. I think there is a case to review the formula and give more weight to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation that are consistently used to target scarce national resources towards the most needy areas. Every Diocese I spoke to with a significant proportion of deprived areas stated that without the Commissioners' Ministry Support funding they would have to reassess their ability to retain a presence in such parishes.

If the way the Church of England spends its money is a reflection of its commitment to urban deprivation, then, despite everything, we continue to display a commendable bias to the poor in our distribution of finance. This is not taken for granted by those parishes who benefit most from such redistribution – indeed I found enormous gratitude from those 'at the sharp end'. Maybe we need to be more imaginative in the ways we help receiving parishes to communicate the effect of this funding to those who give it, in order to encourage continued generosity. This is bread and butter to fund-raisers – always keep your donors well-informed, sufficiently involved, and re-motivated – but it is not something that we do well in the Church of England.

If how we raise and spend our money will always reflect the extent to which we remain committed to the inner urban areas, it will not always be finance that determines the shape of such ministry. For that we need to look at the wider issue of how we understand the church's role in establishing the coming Kingdom for which Christ taught us to pray.

Partners or Prophets?

There are clearly different models for the way in which the church can exercise its role of critical friendship to those who shape the pattern of urban development.

Partnership is the preferred model for an institutional and established church like the Church of England, but the danger is of losing a prophetic edge and gradually becoming 'neutralised' as a change agent. The **prophetic** model is favoured more by groups and institutions who find themselves at the margins and therefore wanting to challenge and confront the dynamics of power – this is more the model of, for example, Community Organising, which attempts to create a powerful structure capable of challenging the established power structures.

Within or across this spectrum it may be possible to find another way, which straddles the two. I suppose we used to call this a Priest! A priest will always occupy the uncomfortable cross-shaped ground of 'intersection', where conflicting ideas and perspectives meet. Both the pain and the privilege of this position is to act as prophet and partner in equal measure. The best examples of urban ministry are where priests (and the priesthood of the believing community) are invited to contribute a sometimes disturbing and disruptive perspective because even their opponents recognise the validity of their critical support.

Exploring urban ministry confronts you with a number of polar extremes in terms of an understanding of the church and its role in society:

- Citizenship vs Discipleship
- Reason vs Revelation
- World vs Church
- Culture vs Christ

How the Church understands its role in relation to civil society will largely determine its modus operandi. Establishment inevitably makes us lean towards an understanding of our role reflected by the axis of 'world', 'culture', 'reason' and 'citizenship'. This is the broad view that was held by the authors of Faith In The City. We are the Church Of and For England, called to serve individuals and the structures of society whether they count themselves as Christian or not. It is of course the basis on which the parish system works, and broadly speaking it lies behind our understanding of priesthood.

At the time of Faith In The City this remained the dominant view of the Church of England's relationship with civil society. It assumed an essential convergence between Christian values and those of the wider culture. However, over the past 25 years the UK

has become increasingly secular and pluralist, and the basic assumption of a shared view of the world, broadly corresponding to the Christian narrative, no longer cuts much ice.

I believe this change has only been recognised (or accepted) slowly in the church, which partly explains why partnership models have remained the persistent approach of urban ministers, even up to the present day.

But in my travels, and in the direction of research and theology, I have begun to detect a significant shift away from this.

In part you can detect this in Faithful Cities' questioning of the partnership approach – although there it seems to be framed in terms of what elements of 'control' we may have relinquished in order to get into bed with national and local government.

More significantly perhaps, key figures like Stephen Lowe and Elaine Graham are asking if *"it may be time for the urban church to eschew the idea of 'baptising' the surrounding culture in favour of a practical theology that emphasises a more distinctive, counter-cultural, even prophetic ethic"* (What Makes A Good City, p3).

The first chapter of What Makes A Good City is a fascinating study of the theological tussle being played out between the more traditional 'public theology' approach (on which Faith In The City and much subsequent urban ministry is predicated), and the emerging post-liberal 'ecclesial theology' that sees a more central role for the church in setting rather than following the public agenda.

Although Graham and Lowe's arguments are largely theological, I have detected echoes of this debate at a very practical and grass-roots level. At one level something of this lies behind those committed to the Growth Agenda, for some of whom at least the reason for pursuing growth is not for the church's sake but so that the church can better express the life of the kingdom for the world. Earlier I used the words 'self-absorbed' to describe the last 20 years of the Church of England, but I recognise that to those pursuing a post-liberal ecclesial agenda, the church is precisely where we should be devoting our energies.

If one challenge to the partnership approach is arising from an evangelical 'growth' perspective, another is emerging from those who feel that the church has been compromised in its ability to stand up against injustice by its increasing proximity to the powerbrokers in the regeneration industry.

Of particular interest here is Community Organising. I recall a fascinating period in my own ministry, early on in Sheffield, when I toyed with the idea of throwing my weight

behind Organising (Broad Based Organising, as it was known then). In the intervening 20 years I have heard little about Organising until I became aware of the significant development of **London Citizens**, and the influence they were beginning to have in the capital.

Subsequently, Church Action on Poverty have started a Changemakers programme in Manchester, based on Community Organising principles, (and run by the man who introduced me to Organising 20 years ago, Mark Waters) and it looks set to grow with some speed across the North of England – helped, no doubt, by a rather famous proponent and one-time Organiser in Chicago, a certain Barack Obama.

Organising is more a prophet than a partner. It works on the basis of numerous alliances, certainly, but it is an essentially prophetic movement designed to challenge, confront and change the established power structures that perpetuate injustice.

Perhaps this explains why the Church of England has a somewhat ambivalent attitude to Organising, because we remain – notionally at least – part of the very establishment that needs to be confronted in the name of justice (back to David Sheppard's insight about standing for justice in ways that might lead to our own disadvantage).

Just as a new landscape needs to emerge in which the proponents of growth and the exponents of community engagement find common cause and common ground, so our understanding of <u>how</u> we fulfil the vision of 'kingdom come' needs to embrace new patterns and possibilities. In the words of Graham and Lowe: *"if a public theology of the world needs to recover its roots in the church, then (a) post-liberal tradition may need to rediscover where a theology of the church reconnects with the real world"* (What Makes A Good City p17)

This discussion of theology and the need for different strands of thought to encounter each other is perhaps a good place to turn to a consideration of urban vocations and training, and the formation of urban ministry.

Urban Vocations and Training

I began my enquiries into urban ministry with an un-tested intuition: As the average age of ordinands has increased, and with an increasing proportion coming from large suburban evangelical churches, clergy 25 years on from Faith In The City are being ordained (a) with less urban experience, (b) with generally suburban models of church in their minds, and (c) more likely to have families with school age children and therefore less inclined to expose themselves (or their families) to the challenges of urban realities.

Although there is undoubtedly some truth in my generalised intuition, I have discovered greater subtleties in the pattern of vocation than I had anticipated.

There are, of course, a number of general factors at work here. Inertia in making appointments is not simply down to a question of vocation. Older ordinands will in general have more 'ties' in the form of domestic responsibilities and spouses in paid employment (and increasingly, working children living at home). Where the spouse is the major earner in the household, the question of moving to a new parish becomes more complicated and inevitably there will be greater inertia in the movement of clergy. This is exacerbated at a time of economic recession when the prospect for spouses finding other jobs decreases. All of which helps to explain the difficulties in appointment to any parish, but as is always the case, this can hit hardest in the poorest areas (perhaps with the exception of the cities, where jobs will be more plentiful).

Most Bishops said that they were still able to fill many of their urban vacancies, although there were variations in how easily they managed to do this.

For instance, there is the 'sexy in the city' effect. That is to say, it is significantly easier to fill a vacancy in an inner city parish than on an outer estate or in a town. Inner city Liverpool is still a draw, but Wigan is more of a problem. Sheffield will attract people, but Thorne will struggle. Bristol has a cache that Swindon can't quite match.

I found this pattern repeated everywhere I went. There is something about the cosmopolitan nature of the city that creates a 'buzz', however hard the experience of living there. One of the compensations of inner city ministry is the easy access to the city centre economy (especially entertainment, leisure and retail), and I have already mentioned the fact that cities offer greater employment possibilities for spouses. All of this is particularly true of London of course, which remains something of a 'city state' and outside all of the usual categories or definitions.

Equally there is the North/South divide. Many of the Northern Bishops said their real problem was not specifically filling urban vacancies, but attracting people to the North in the first place – which is why so many of the urban vacancies in Northern Dioceses tend to be filled from within.

The North/South divide struck me with real force on my travels. Many of the people I interviewed were highly cynical that, if the Lee List is anything to go by, 85% of clergy seeking a move feel called by the Holy Spirit to the South East of England.

This is nothing short of outrageous. Maybe it reflects the growing 'professionalisation' of ministry in the Church of England – or should that be a growing secularisation? I cannot escape the feeling that the move away from a vocational understanding of ministry to a more 'contractual' approach has only hastened our retreat into the suburbs. People seem more inclined to seek ordination on their terms. One Bishop quoted Keith Sutton's parting advice to his ordinands when Principal of Ridley: *"go away from this college, go into the city, and never be heard from again"*. It is difficult to avoid the feeling that such advice might issue in a complaint under CDM today!

This bears some relation to something I was told by an urban Bishop that struck me with such force that I wrote it down verbatim: ***"urban people have no voice because the whole debate takes place in a context that is alien to them".*** This was a reference to the way in which the direction of the Church of England is being set by those with a Southern bias and a suburban mind-set. If the power-base of the church, where all of the decision-making structures reside and the agenda-setting is done, is in a very different place from the urban poor, then this needs to be revisited and reversed. Northern inner city areas can't be bothered with the narrow agendas of gender and sexuality because they are luxuries of self-indulgence when you are faced with the cries of the poor and needy.

I think this is why I was so fascinated by something I observed time and again as I travelled around: the significance of people in urban ministry who in some sense are 'on the edge'. As one of my interviewees put it to me: *"People nearer the edge of the church are more prepared to go nearer the edge of the community"*.

I was struck by how many people minister in really tough urban contexts who have been, in Bonhoeffer's memorable phrase, "edged out of the centre and on to the cross" by the church or society: women, celibate men, gays, disturbing radicals – you find them all here, in the inner cities and on the outer estates, ministering faithfully and imaginatively in the name of Christ. Nearly always at significant personal cost. Often, it seems, people are called <u>to</u> the edge, <u>from</u> the edge.

For me, this was one of the exciting aspects of the Church of England's continuing ministry in these sorts of places. It was a real sign of the Kingdom, where the outsiders take the place of the insiders; a prophetic symbol of Christ, when the stones the builders reject become the cornerstones of the building.

There is another important aspect to urban vocation and training, and this is the extent to which the training for ordination exposes ordinands to urban environments. Faith In The City recommended the setting up of contextual urban placements in the theological colleges, and there was a fertile period when some significant long placements were established – Westcott/Manchester, Cuddesdon/Sheffield, Salisbury/London, Durham/Gateshead, etc. These had 2 important effects – firstly, they gave ordinands a real experience of inner city ministry and encouraged many of them to seek posts in urban areas after they were ordained, and secondly, even if the ordinands didn't look for an inner city job, they had been exposed to the issues of inner city life and were much more able to be advocates for urban ministry from within their own parishes.

25 years on, only the Westcott/Manchester link survives (and flourishes, as I discovered from my visits to both Westcott and Manchester). The others have fallen away, for various reasons, neatly explained by a current Principal:

1. There are now far fewer single ordination candidates under 30 years of age (it was often the single students who were able to spend 9 weeks on placement away from 'home') - and whilst spending one term out of nine (i.e., 3 years training) was feasible, one term out of six was not so easy to envisage, because the training period is shorter.

2. Local theological resources have been depleted in a number of the placement settings, so the provision of adequate additional tutoring became a problem.

3. With the depletion of ministerial resources in the placement setting, large and vibrant teams that offered a rounded placement experience have often shrunk to a size that cannot properly support a long placement.

4. The changing demographics post-Faith In The City has meant that placements ideally need to offer inter-faith or multi-cultural engagement, and some of the original placement settings never had this dimension.

5. Shrinking funding from Ministry Division means that colleges have to trim budgets, and it is no longer viable to sustain long placements of this nature.

The situation beyond Westcott therefore remains patchy. I exchanged correspondence with all of the College Principals, each of whom maintained that they remain committed to preparing people for urban ministry. It is good to see that, against the difficult backdrop outlined above, there are still some imaginative and creative initiatives happening (Durham, Bristol and Birmingham stood out for me). Taken as a whole, however, it did not feel as if many of the colleges had training for urban ministry as an absolute priority.

So I am led back to my basic point again, that the Church of England's main constituency, measured by population, is urban; and yet we seem to have manoeuvred ourselves into a situation where we are broadly speaking preparing people for ministry to the middle classes. And even those colleges who are most willing to address this are often hamstrung by the structures and finance of the current system.

There is, of course, another side to this question of vocation. If one aspect of urban vocation is those who are called to inner city and outer estate parishes, the other is those who are called from them.

From the conversations I had up and down the country, it is clear that the Church of England still struggles to produce indigenous vocations arising from within urban parishes. Very few ordinands emerge from areas of urban deprivation.

Some of the reasons for this arise within the parishes themselves. I have already drawn attention to the fact that the dysfunctional nature of life in an inner urban environment can fill people's lives with all manner of psychological complexities, and levels of aspiration and self-confidence are often low. This makes it much harder to identify people with the necessary stability or confidence to move into any form of 'professional' ministry.

But the nature of the church's requirements for education and training ministers is also a key factor in disempowering people from within urban areas to offer for ministry. One of my most interesting conversations was with a man who had been accepted for ordination in the immediate aftermath of Faith In The City. His upbringing was indigenous working class, and he had few academic qualifications. But his vocation was recognised by others and affirmed by the church in the light of Faith In The City. He flourished on the Aston training scheme, followed it up with time at a theological college, and was ordained in his mid to late 20s. He continues to serve an area very close to where he was brought up, and has exercised a ministry of considerable distinction for nearly 20 years.

The fascinating point about his example is that he does not think he would have been accepted for training today, given his background and qualifications.

I have a suspicion that the church's willingness to adopt the Hind Report is all part of the 'suburbanisation' of the Church of England. It seems bizarre that a church predominantly represented in urban areas (if you measure the church's presence by head of population) should tie its training so strongly to an academic standard. As one Bishop put it to me, this makes no sense *"unless we only want to work with a middle class executive culture"*.

There are, undoubtedly, some examples of good practice around the country in selecting and training people for urban ministries lay and ordained, but a number of my interviewees expressed considerable disquiet that our basic model is too heavily biased towards those from a professional background. They were calling for a relaxation of some of the rules regarding selection and training, a greater willingness to license experimentation, and more widespread use of the powers of local decision-making that still exist within the Church of England.

The question also arises as to whether the Regional Training Partnerships and the Colleges have ever really been able to replicate what the Aston scheme did so well with those who did not 'fit' into the normal structures. Is it time to look again at the Aston model?

Another observation from my travels was that the opportunities for young people to spend a year (or similar) living and working on placement in an urban environment are shrinking. It was striking how many of the clergy I talked to had spent time at places like 'The Shewsy' (Shrewsbury House, in Everton) and had found this a life-changing experience. The growth of the 'gap year' industry has hit these sort of placements hard, but it may be important to try and re-imagine similar sorts of 'internships' in deprived areas if we are to capture the imagination of young people for urban ministry in a different generation.

I need to finish this section with one further observation about urban vocation, which begs a question.

The observation is simple. Those bishops most closely associated with implementing Faith In The City and keeping the urban flame burning, are either retired or soon to retire. Sparing their blushes, they have been wonderful advocates for the inner urban areas of our country, and their own experience of working (often, indeed usually, as parish priests) in such areas has given them both a critical understanding of the issues facing urban parishes, and a real commitment to place these issues at the heart of their diocesan strategies.

The question is therefore equally simple: where is the next generation of urban bishops going to come from, those who have urban ministry running through their veins?

It is an important question, because there are growing pressures on episcopal ministry, and if – as many predict – the task of a bishop will become increasingly managerial over the coming years, we may see less people appointed to bishoprics who have come through the urban route. At a time when the 'urban' is already less of a priority for the Church of England, this may take it even further off the agenda.

While it is undoubtedly true that many clergy appointed as Bishops in broadly urban dioceses can and do grow into the job as 'urban bishops' (and I met a number of people who would fall into this category), I cannot escape the feeling that the church needs a critical mass of people who really do 'get' urban ministry because they have the T-shirt.

Church Tradition

If the past 25 years has been marked by the loss of an urban priority in the Church of England's agenda, it has also corresponded with an increase in the influence of evangelicalism. This shift in the prevailing church tradition has surfaced in most of my conversations as a significant factor in the preoccupations of the national church. Many people feel strongly that the growth of the evangelical movement in the Church of England is firmly linked to the demise of an urban agenda – because of evangelicalism's traditional concern with individual soul-saving, and the lower prominence it has given historically to issues of social justice and the public square.

This is, however, to treat evangelicism too simplistically. While the growing influence of this tradition might explain some of the drift away from a focus on the public square and civil society, there is an honourable and significant history of social engagement within many streams of evangelicalism, and some of the most creative responses to Faith In The City emerged from an evangelical stable (including, I hope, my own).

The issue may be more to do with a particular brand of suburban evangelicalism, which has been highly successful in terms of church growth and Christian giving, but which has held a fairly narrow theological perspective within the spectrum of theologies embraced by the Church of England. These large suburban churches, and the networks they have created, have much from which the church as a whole needs to learn. But they have tended by their size and income to be able to exert a disproportionate influence over the direction of dioceses and the national church.

Through no fault of their own, they have a limited understanding of the nature of mission and ministry in deprived urban areas (many of the decisions and actions that affect the inner cities and outer estates are taken by people who live in these suburban parishes and congregations, and that's another story requiring its own particular solution – to make connections for suburban evangelicals who live much of their lives around the forensic aspects of urban ministry), but the assumptions they bring to the church's task will often be at odds with the perspectives and experiences of the urban poor and the churches that serve them.

Although the story is patchy, I found cause for optimism on my travels that some large suburban evangelical churches were moving beyond their inherited perspectives and (re)discovering a call to the urban poor. Indeed if we are to re-imagine urban ministry for a new generation, I believe that the conversion of suburban evangelicals will be a key factor.

Jon Kuhrt wrote a significant chapter in 'Crossover City' ('Resisting Tribal Theology') in which he talks about uniting 'collective responsibility' with 'personal transformation'. Faith in the City, he says, was strong on the former but weak on the latter, and Faithful Cities was dominated by a liberal agenda and therefore strong on structural inequality and sociological analysis but weak on the contribution of evangelicals. He argues for an integrated approach to social action, evangelism, church growth and unity, and sees the growing influence of Pentecostal and charismatic evangelicals within urban engagement as a sign of hope that this fusion can be achieved appropriately. Some of the emerging partnerships between the Church of England and the Pentecostal, charismatic and black-led churches (for example in the Diocese of Bristol) are fascinating signs of a new direction for urban ministry.

What about some of the other traditions that have been important in urban ministry? Historically, anglo-catholicism has made a very significant contribution in this area, and, while it continues to do so, the fragmentation of the catholic constituency has undoubtedly taken its toll. I spoke to many people who bemoaned the diminished influence of anglo-catholicism both pre- and post-1994, and expressed deep regret at the way an over-concern with church politics has tempered the social dimension of its incarnational theology.

Indeed, a number of people expressed an anxiety about the forthcoming debates on sexuality and women bishops because of the potential for anglo-catholics and conservative evangelicals to disengage with the structures of the Church of England. This will have a disproportionately bigger impact on the poor, who may need the traditionalist sector to thrive.

But alongside these shifting sands, we have witnessed the almost total demise of the liberal tradition (where are the likes of Eric James today?) which has also delivered a more socialist agenda for the church in the past. The loss of this 'voice' or perspective has both reflected but also influenced the theological footprint of the Church of England in the past 20 years.

The other element of theology drawn into this is liberation theology, which lay behind a considerable part of Faith in the City, but was never really pursued post-1985. I will pick this up briefly when I look at the influence of quasi or para church groups, which may be the only part of the ecclesial constituency to keep this flame alight today.

Whereas all of these movements in church tradition have had an impact on the marginalisation of urban ministry in the Church of England, I could not help but be struck in my various conversations by the extraordinary common bond between church

communities in urban areas, which transcended different traditions and offered new perspectives on the potential for unity within our diversity.

For those who live and work at the sharp end of places gripped by multiple deprivation, the prevailing language and preoccupations of the Church of England are the stuff of nonsense, a proverbial shifting of deckchairs on the Titanic. I detected huge frustration with the self-indulgence of our current agendas, when the real issues of human existence are so 'in your face' among the urban poor.

It is fascinating to observe the way in which a commitment to theological purity dissolves in the midst of the urban experience. Partly this is due to the fact that, in the inner cities especially, you are exposed to almost every type of 'difference' imaginable and those whose look, language, customs, beliefs and lifestyles are so different from your own become your neighbours, colleagues and friends. In the face of this friendship grows and stereotypes and prejudices diminish.

Urban space is intrinsically 'contested' and diverse. It therefore becomes the place par excellence where people have to get out of their theological silos and make sense of a complex world. This has led Bishop Laurie Green to state "*it is dangerous to formulate any theology at a distance from the poor*" (Crossover City, p11), a point the Church of England would do well to underline in red.

All of which tends to give those who minister in areas of urban deprivation a fresh perspective on theology and a refreshing openness to new thinking mediated by the meeting of human experience with biblical revelation.

This in turn often reduces the importance of differences in ecclesiology or tradition. Not that people abandon their distinctiveness for a mushy similarity, but that they seem able to celebrate their differences without the need to impose them on others.

In this I detected the possibility that rediscovering a focus on areas of multiple urban deprivation might paradoxically begin to offer the Church of England a new way through its current differences.

I also recognised the fact that in the past it has often been the urban parishes that were at the cutting edge of developments in ministry and mission, from which the wider church learnt. And I encountered a number of imaginative approaches on my travels that persuaded me this tradition of innovation and inspiration is still very much alive.

Models of Urban Ministry

Faith In The City was published 2 years after another important Church of England report, John Tiller's **A Strategy For The Church's Ministry**. I number myself among those who have long felt that Tiller was a watershed moment for the church, when we were offered a radical new alternative for the way in which we might organise and envisage ministry, but for whatever reason we drew back and Tiller was effectively shelved.

Nearly 3 decades later people are beginning to realise this was a missed opportunity, and this report is being looked at again to see what has stood the test of time and can still speak prophetically to us in our own day.

Buried deep within the report (p72) is this haunting question about the parochial system:
"There is not a blade of grass in the country that is not situated in somebody's parish. This arrangement may cover the ground very well, especially in those areas of the countryside which do actually contain blades of grass. But does it necessarily constitute the best way of ministering the Gospel in the highly urbanised society of modern Britain?"

Tiller acknowledged firmly the strengths of the parochial system as it related to urban ministry (faithful, rooted care in its community, engaged with the people and social issues of its neighbourhood, present as the public face of the church and open-minded space of its locality), but was critical of its weaknesses as well (too much emphasis on maintenance and survival, introspective and isolationist, trapped in geographical boundaries that bore no relation to the real demographics of the area, at the mercy of falling stipendiary clergy numbers, disconnected from key 'sector' ministries, and unable to cope with the increasing fragmentation of neighbourhood communities – a magisterial summary that was way ahead of its day). He proposed a system of cell-congregation-pilgrimage (or assembly) as an alternative model that could retain the strengths of the parochial system and mitigate some of its weaknesses.

Faith In The City adopted a broadly parochial approach to ministry. It felt that the parish system had been the way in which the Church of England had retained its commitment to the Urban Priority Areas, and as such it proposed little more than a few minor developments within a broadly collaborative approach to ministry in the UPA's (see pp 93-95 of the report).

However, 25 years on from Faith In The City it is clear that the Church of England is prepared – for different reasons – to think out of the parochial box more than it has ever

done before, and I came across a number of innovative approaches to ministry in urban areas that are either being considered or have already been tried:

Groups/Teams/Clusters/Mission Partnerships – this basic collaborative approach is still very popular in most of the Dioceses, and probably represents the mainstream at the moment. It takes the parish system as its heart, but ensures that ministry is collaborative in order to avoid problems of isolation among hard-pressed urban clergy and laity.

The Minster Model – increasingly this idea, of centring urban ministry around a 'hub', is being considered by Dioceses with a significant urban landscape. It is a development of some of the thinking that emerged from the Tiller report, allowing teams of clergy and laity to minister within an urban area, but with reduced stipendiary clergy numbers. At present, most of the experimentation is focused on churches which are already minsters – like Dewsbury and Halifax – but we may see a growing interest in this approach over the next 10 years and it would benefit from some proper research and a few well-planned pilots.

Cathedrals – as a Cathedral Dean I have, quite deliberately, tried to suppress the urge to include a 'cathedral' section in this paper. But cathedrals' trumpets do need to be blown (Moral But No Compass repeatedly made the point that cathedrals exert a strong and positive influence on the public square in UK society), because their contribution to the urban landscape in many of our towns and cities is substantial. Many urban cathedrals have probably been operating a form of the Minster Model for some years without calling it by that name. Again, the church would do well to take a good look at the ways in which cathedrals have developed their urban ministry over the past 2 decades, for there is much to be learned here.

Bishop's Mission Order – one of the most interesting and imaginative uses of a BMO is the Byker experiment in East Newcastle, the Urban Ministry & Theology Project. Rather than adopt a Team, Group, Cluster or Minster approach, the UMTP project has drawn together 4 neighbouring parishes under a BMO that requires clergy to adopt a collaborative approach – each incumbent is appointed half time as incumbent to the parish and half time to some form of collaborative ministry within UMTP. As UMTP describes it, *"the purpose..... is to live out a style of Christian Ministry that assists local churches and communities to engage effectively with the processes of social and economic regeneration in the East End of Newcastle upon Tyne"*. This approach has been very successful both in terms of revitalising the churches and making a significant contribution to the regeneration of East Newcastle.

Base Communities – perhaps the most hopeful sign of new patterns of ministry and mission emerging in urban areas has been the development of a number of initiatives which I am clustering under a description of 'base communities' (it's fascinating to see again how Tiller characterised the direction of travel for urban ministry as 'basic Christian communities", a concept remarkably close to what I am describing here):

There are a number of examples of small, urban community models emerging that have varying connections to the institutional church. I have come across the influence of …

The New Monastic Movement – in particular the 'urban monastery' approach adopted by St Thomas Crookes' (Sheffield) 'Order of Mission' and some of the 'missional communities' that have emerged from its offshoot, St Thomas Philadelphia. Another example would be 'Boiler Rooms' (the punk monastery developed in Reading by Andy Freeman and others, along Benedictine lines). These developments have emerged from strong evangelical churches, but with a real radical cutting edge and a strong emphasis on the formation of those called to live and work and worship within them. Attracting large numbers of young people, they are signs of hope of an emerging movement in evangelicalism to reconnect with urban ministry. The challenge will be to do so from within a visibly Anglican identity.

The Message (Eden) – once again, a radical evangelical movement of largely young people, currently with 13 communities established in Manchester, Sheffield and beyond. These have little or no structural connection with the Church of England, but the vision is very similar to that of the new monastic movement and The Message have managed to capture the imagination of a culture, working with significant numbers of alienated (often young) people in a way that the Church of England has struggled to do.

'Love Bristol' – this is a free independent churches group, with a very similar approach to The Message. There are encouraging signs of a significant level of co-operation between this group and the Anglican churches in Bristol.

Urban Expression – this is a movement that emerged from an Anabaptist tradition and has been planting communities in the inner city for over 10 years. It stresses the long-term nature of the commitment, and offers a more sobering assessment of the cost of such discipleship and ministry in an urban context.

The Sant 'Egidio model – emerging from a Roman Catholic and continental context, this is once again a movement of largely young people based on Prayer, Communicating the Gospel, Solidarity with the Poor, Ecumenism, and Dialogue. Given the evangelical nature of the other 'community' models, Sant 'Egidio offers a similar approach from within a

different theological and ecclesiological understanding, and therefore has attracted interest from the alternative traditions of the Church of England's urban constituency.

I was also interested to come across a group of disaffected ex-Christian Union students who committed themselves to inner city Leeds 10 years ago (and are still there). This group turned its back on the institutional church, but committed themselves to live in inner city Leeds. They began living in community and now live in separate houses, but they continue to meet to pray and to engage with the social issues of the city.

All of these examples are based on some form of community living, expressed in a common commitment to one another and to the areas in which they live. They base their common life around a form of prayer, worship and service. And their focus is on areas of urban deprivation and social need.

These are inspiring stories, filled with the hope of a new radicalism and a renewed (and costly) Christian commitment to the places and people of our society who are at the sharp end of things. It does not require much analysis to realise that the Church of England is not well represented within this movement, and we ought to be making a point of learning from the experiences of Sheffield and Reading in particular, who have adopted a model that has emerged from an Anglican setting and is trying to reconnect with a monastic strand in our tradition and history. Again, with my cathedral hat on, it would be fascinating to set up a conversation between urban cathedrals and the new monastic movement, to see what we could learn from each other.

Many of these initiatives express a newly-(re)discovered commitment to urban ministry among evangelicals, and represent a growing disillusion among some young people at the church's 'blind eye' towards the urban poor. They are signs of hope.

However, the predominant model of ministry in inner city/outer estates continues to be the traditional parish model, which can leave clergy isolated, unsupported and often de-motivated, discouraged, or simply disconnected from the stimulus of fresh ideas or examples of good practice. It could be very useful to commission some national research on the different models of collaborative ministry being developed in the inner cities – perhaps via the Church Commissioners' newly-established R & D fund.

Poverty, Inequality and Justice

As I move towards the end of my reflections, I want to return to a theme that runs like a thread through all of the questions I have been considering, namely the fact that far from things getting better over the past 25 years, they have actually got worse.

I began my sabbatical by reading Philip Blond's **'Red Tory'**, partly because it was the eve of a general election in which Blond was credited as generating the ideas behind David Cameron's "Big Society", and partly because I was intrigued by a political and religious philosopher who had made an interesting journey over precisely the period I was thinking about.

'Red Tory' does not make for comfortable reading. Despite the fact that it was rubbished as the ramblings of "Cameron's Crank" by no less a luminary than Jonathan Raban, it makes the point – from a right-wing perspective – that 25 years of essentially Thatcherite, neo-liberal Government under both the Tories and New Labour has created a society riddled with problems. Not least of which is the fact that relative poverty over those 25 years has increased.

It is precisely because 'relative poverty' is deemed unimportant (Tony Blair was happy for the rich to get richer, so long as the poor were dragged along with them, to some degree), that Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett wrote their bestseller **'The Spirit Level'** about inequality in 2009. They make the point, backed up by considerable research from across the world, that the more unequal a society is, the deeper its social problems will be.

The authors point out that the life-diminishing results of valuing growth above equality in rich societies can be seen all around us. Inequality causes shorter, unhealthier and unhappier lives; it increases the rate of teenage pregnancy, violence, obesity, imprisonment and addiction; it destroys relationships between individuals born in the same society but into different classes; and its function as a driver of consumption depletes the planet's resources.

As Lynsey Hanley wrote in a Guardian review of **The Spirit Level** when it came out: "*It's impossible to overstate the implications of their thesis: that the societies of Britain and the US have institutionalised economic and social inequality to the extent that, at any one time, a quarter of their respective populations are mentally ill. What kind of "growth" is that, other than a malignant one?*"

So, relative poverty is important. Inequality is important. And justice demands that we take the widening gap between rich and poor seriously.

But the silence of the Church of England on these matters is deafening.

Perhaps this explains in part the emergence of Organising as a movement, because the church seems unprepared or unable to take a strategic approach to matters of poverty, power and inequality. I was interested to see how many individuals – lay and ordained – are getting involved with Organising, which seems to reflect a frustration that there is nothing similar on offer within the church.

In talking to Niall Cooper at Church Action on Poverty, it became clear that CAP may come to see their future based around an Organising model, again partly out of frustration that the church as an institution seems unable to formulate any sort of institutional response.

There is also a tendency, even when the church is at its most effective and engaged with these issues, for us to 'speak on behalf of the poor' instead of finding ways to allow the poor to speak for themselves. A number of people I interviewed felt that we do not distinguish sufficiently between the local and the indigenous – in other words, the church can be very good at stimulating, encouraging and organising local action, but such action is not always indigenous to that community, it is done to it or for it rather than by it.

This suggests that, at the least, the Church of England should think carefully about switching its emphasis to 'process' from 'projects', to relationships from regeneration.

It was also fascinating, in conversation with Tim Bissett at the Church Urban Fund, to see the changes that are emerging there.

I have encountered wildly different views about CUF in my visits, from those (generally in the Northern industrial heartlands) who still feel there is a significant role for CUF to play, to those (generally elsewhere) who don't!

CUF itself has been through a process of self-examination and is emerging with a distinctive view of the contribution it can make in changed circumstances. It has adopted a 'poverty' agenda and is considering a partnership with CAP, which might sharpen the 'social justice' dimension of its work.

If the noises coming from our new Government are right, and there is a growing feeling that after 20 years 'regeneration is dead', what solutions can be found to crack the real and entrenched poverty that persists across UK cities, that has proved so stubborn and resistant to the best that classic regeneration models have thrown at it?

As things stand, it is difficult to see where the prophetic voice about poverty and inequality is being raised from within the institution, which raises the questions: will CAP and CUF end up as the non-parochial prophetic voice of the Church of England on these issues? Will they help us rediscover the radical, liberation theology elements to Faith In The City? And if they won't, who will?

Conclusion

Everywhere I've been has reinforced the impression that the Church of England continues to be an impressive force for good in the inner urban areas. I have been surprised – and delighted – at the quality of clergy and laity who retain a sense of calling. The work that is going on within inner urban parishes is often quite exceptional and inspirational. Without a shadow of a doubt, if the church was to suddenly absent itself from these parishes, the social fabric of the whole country would experience the shock waves. Churches may not be growing numerically in these areas (some are, amazingly) but the contribution of the church to 'community cohesion' and to sustaining hope is a rare thread of social continuity at worst, and at its best it is quite extraordinary.

If the Church of England remains hugely credible within urban neighbourhoods at a local level, it struggles with credibility at a national level. There is of course one notable exception. Stephen Lowe's contribution as Bishop for Urban Life and Faith cannot be over-stated. His regular 'retreats' for urban clergy were hugely appreciated, which reflected a continuing sense of isolation and under-appreciation for those involved in some of the toughest parishes in the country. His work on urban theology with Elaine Graham, Chris Baker and Andrew Davey enabled a re-interpretation of the church's engagement with urban ministry. And his high-level networking ensured that the Church of England had the ear of policymakers and the tongue of prophets.

The appointment of Christopher Chessun as successor to Stephen is a positive sign that the church has still retained a focused commitment to urban areas at an Episcopal level, but he will not have the same amount of time to devote to the role and this will inevitably limit what he is able to achieve. The work of the Urban Bishops Panel will assume even greater significance in this respect, and I hope that it will be broad-minded enough to continue to seek the advice of people like Stephen Lowe and Laurie Green, even when the latter also retires later this year.

Despite these best efforts, it is at the macro level that my initial intuition has been borne out most strongly – that urban ministry has dropped far below the radar of the Church of England. There is a lot going on at ground level but there is no national narrative of this work, and we have lost the strategic mindset that Faith In The City offered us.

The implications of this are two-fold. Firstly we dissipate the effect of the good work that is going on. People are often left isolated and unsupported; mutual learning and support does not take place; we are unable to present a national narrative that has credibility in the eyes of those around us; and we do not concentrate resources effectively. But secondly, and arguably more importantly, the lack of an urban strategy disconnects the

Church of England from its core constituency. When over 90% of the population of the UK live in urban environments, but the power and strategic base of the church remains in the suburbs, we are guilty of theological apartheid.

Urban ministry does not really appear to be on the agenda for General Synod. In terms of Archbishop's Council it has been pushed towards Mission and Public Affairs (and a number of my interviewees spoke very optimistically of Malcolm Brown's role at MPA). Declining numbers have focused the minds on a Growth Agenda. Presence and Engagement has been an important initiative but I doubt if many people in the Church of England know much about it. The meta-narrative of the Anglican Communion is currently one of division and dissent – we are known by others for a focus on gender and sexuality, and so much of the work highlighted by 'moral but no compass' is ignored or unseen.

So, the invisibility of urban ministry within the broad landscape of the Church of England is extraordinary given the significance of the urban context in national life, and the widening gap of income and opportunity between rich and poor.

Perhaps the new coalition Government's commitment to reduce national debt by a squeeze on public spending will bring us to our senses, because this will undoubtedly have a regressive effect and hit the poor harder than the rich. Whether these austerity measures will cause public unrest on the scale of the early 1980s remains to be seen (if the experience in Greece is anything to go by, it might), but the cuts will only increase the levels of inequality in our already unequal society, and in a perverse sort of way this might make the church wake up and smell the coffee.

This will require a significant shift away from an agenda that for 20 years has emphasised reversing numerical decline, partnering with power-brokers, engaging with the executive (and suburban) middle class, and the professionalization of ministry. None of these things are bad in themselves, but they have had the effect of distancing the Church of England from its mainstream urban constituency in general, and its inner urban responsibilities in particular. Set alongside the Synod's preoccupation with sexuality and gender, we have seen 20 years of the Church becoming increasingly marginal and irrelevant in precisely those areas which represent the largest swathe of the UK's population.

A shift in focus will affect many areas of church life, not least funding and finance, training for ministry, the active encouragement of indigenous inner urban vocations, a willingness to confront the North/South divide for the shameful thing it is, encouraging (and learning from) a renewed evangelical commitment to deprived communities, re-imagining models of collaborative ministry (and releasing the constraints that inhibit collaboration), and

finding the right synthesis between prophecy and partnership in our relationship with the public square.

These things will not happen naturally, they require strategy and commitment, and perhaps a healthy dose of repentance.

Any sense of strategic urban direction for the Church of England as a whole will always be susceptible to the 44 individual directions of travel being taken by the Dioceses, but that is not a sufficient reason to avoid the attempt. If leadership within our church always emerges via a coalition (formed of something like the House of Bishops, Archbishops Council, General Synod, and the Dioceses) this can be a strength not a weakness for an idea whose time has come.

And I do honestly believe that time may be now. The arguments for a shift in strategic emphasis are in my view every bit as compelling as they were 25 years ago. All we lack is the political will, the spiritual conviction, and the strength of purpose to walk to the beat of a different drum.

Appendix A: Acknowledgements

I would like to dedicate this piece of work to the amazing men and women, lay and ordained, who live out their Christian commitment in urban communities where daily living is tough. The 'leaven' of the church in such areas continues to be a sign of enormous hope.

It has been a privilege to visit many different people in the course of my sabbatical journey and receive the hospitality of their time and insights. By naming them I run the risk of omitting someone through my own forgetfulness or oversight, but I hope that my fragmented reflections honour the commitment they made to me:

Ven Richard Atkinson, Archdeacon of Leicester
Revd Dale Barton, Vicar of St Clements, Bradford
Mrs Joy Bates, Community Action Officer, Diocese of Derby
Mr Tim Bissett, Chief Executive of the Church Urban Fund
Canon Sarah Bullock, Rector of Moss Side, Manchester
Rt Revd and Rt Hon Richard Chartres, Bishop of London
Rt Revd Christopher Chessun, Bishop of Woolwich
Mr Niall Cooper, Chief Executive of Church Action on Poverty
Canon Henry Corbett, Vicar of St Peter's, Everton
Rt Revd Steven Croft, Bishop of Sheffield
Revd Dr Andrew Davey, National Advisor on Community and Urban Affairs
Revd Helen Edwards, Vicar of Christ Church, Norris Green, Liverpool
Revd Sue Faulkner, Priest in Charge, St Silas Byker, Newcastle
Canon Kathryn Fitzsimons, Urban Officer, Ripon and Leeds
Revd Mandy Ford, Vicar, Christ the King, Beaumont Leys, Leicester
Revd Simon Gatenby, Rector of Brunswick, Manchester
Rt Revd Laurie Green, Bishop of Bradwell
Ven John Hawley, Archdeacon of Blackburn
Canon Tim Higgins, Vicar of St Stephen's City, Bristol
Rt Revd Mike Hill, Bishop of Bristol
Revd Tim Horobin, Parish Development Officer, Diocese of Blackburn
Rt Revd David James, Bishop of Bradford
Rt Revd James Jones, Bishop of Liverpool
Rt Revd Stephen Lowe, recently-retired Bishop for Urban Life and Faith
Rt Revd Nigel McCulloch, Bishop of Manchester
Ven Geoff Miller, Archdeacon of Northumberland
Mr Martin Miller, Director, Church And Society, Manchester
Mr Terry Murnane, Co-ordinator, Burnley Faith Centre, Burnley

Revd Sam Nicholson, Vicar of St Catharine's, Wigan
Rt Revd John Packer, Bishop of Ripon and Leeds
Ven Ricky Panter, Archdeacon of Liverpool
Parish Development Team, Diocese of Blackburn
Canon Kevin Partington, Rector of Dewsbury Minster, Wakefield
Revd Catherine Pickford, Vicar of Benwell, Newcastle
Rt Revd Stephen Platten, Bishop of Wakefield
Rt Revd Nicholas Reade, Bishop of Blackburn
Revd Kathryn Robertson, Team Vicar, Dewsbury, Wakefield
Revd Malcolm Rogers, Vicar of St Gabriel, Huyton, Liverpool
Canon Martin Seeley, Principal of Westcott House
Most Revd and Rt Hon John Sentamu, Archbishop of York
Rt Revd Tim Stevens, Bishop of Leicester
Canon Julian Sullivan, Vicar of St Mary's, Bramall Lane, Sheffield
Rt Revd David Urquhart, Bishop of Birmingham
Canon Dave Wade, Vicar of St Luke's, Victoria Docks, Newham
Rt Revd Martin Wharton, Bishop of Newcastle
Revd Kate Wharton, Vicar of St George's, Everton
Canon Guy Wilkinson, Archbishop's Secretary for Inter Faith Relations

Appendix B: Reading List

One of the great privileges of a sabbatical is the time and space afforded for reflection and study. The following books, articles and periodicals have informed my thinking while on sabbatical:

ACUPA: Faith In The City (CUP 1985)
Christopher Baker: The Hybrid Church In The City (SCM Press 2007)
Phillip Blond: Red Tory (Faber & Faber 2010)
Carnegie UK Trust: Making Good Society (2010)
Coventry University: CUF: Churches in Action (2009)
Steve Croft (ed): The Future of the Parish System (CUP 2006)
Crucible: On the Faultlines of the Global City (July – September 2004)
CULF: Faithful Cities (Methodist Publishing House 2006)
Andrew Davey (ed): Crossover City (Mowbrays 2010) Diocese of Newcastle: For the Many not just the Few (2004) Michael Foley: The Age of Absurdity (Simon & Shuster 2010) Andy Freeman and Pete Greig: Punk Monk (Regal 2007)
Elaine Graham and Stephen Lowe: What Makes A Good City? (SCM Press 2007)
Laurie Green and Chris Baker: Building Utopia? (SPCK 2008)
James Jones: Towards A Theology of Urban Regeneration (Journal of Urban Regeneration & Renewal Jan 2009)
Juliet Kilpin and Stuart Murray: Church Planting In The Inner City (Grove Evangelism Series 78 2007)
Richard Layard and Judy Dunn: A Good Childhood (searching for values in a competitive age, Penguin 2009)
Stephen Lowe (ed): Contact, issue 152 (2007)
Stephen Lowe: The Urban Church 3 Years On From Faithful Cities (G51745 Urban Life and Faith, 2009)
Ann Morisy: Journeying Out (Continuum 2004)
Stephen Platten: Rebuilding Jerusalem (SPCK 2007)
David Sheppard: Built As A City (Hodder & Stoughton, 1985 revised)
David Sheppard: Bias to the Poor (Hodder & Stoughton, 1983)
Asheem Singh: The Venture Society (ResPublica 2010)
John Tiller: A Strategy for the Church's Ministry (CI0 Publishing 1983)
Von Hügel Institute: Moral, But No Compass (Matthew James Publishing 2008)
Andrew Walker and Luke Bretherton (eds): Remembering our Future (explorations in Deep Church, Paternoster 2007)
Jim Wallis: Seven Ways to Change The World (Lion 2008)
Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett: The Spirit Level (Penguin 2009)