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URBAN MISSION 40 YEARS ON TOWARDS AN ONGOING PRESENCE

Greg Smith

URBAN TRACTS



Urban Mission 40 Years On: Towards an Ongoing Presence

Greg Smith (with Paul Keeble & Derek Purnell)

Urban Tracts, Book 1

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Cover image of Park Hill Flats, Sheffield by Greg Smith

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Editors' Introduction

Urban Tracts is a series of papers on urban mission and ministry commissioned in the lead up to the 40th anniversary of the *Faith in the City* report.

The Brixton disturbances of April 1981 prompted, among other things, Archbishop Robert Runcie to set up the Archbishop's Commission on Urban Priority Areas. This led to the publication of the *Faith in the City* report in December 1985 with its recommendations for church and nation, which proved a great stimulus for urban ministry across the whole UK church. In 2021 the issues of social inequality, racial justice and the failure of the Church to flourish and grow in urban settings have not gone away—although the enthusiasm for urban ministry of the late 1980s seems to have waned.

To mark the anniversary, the William Temple Foundation is commissioning and publishing (electronically) a new Temple Tract series on urban mission and ministry. Our aim is to produce three or four tracts each year in the lead up to the 40-year anniversary of *Faith in The City* in December 2025.

The tracts are aimed at practitioners and church leaders, offering reflection and experience from authors who have been involved in urban mission and ministry. We aim to highlight resources and lessons that are relevant for Christians in urban areas today and renew the challenge to the churches.

In seeking an appropriate style for the urban church there will be plenty of photos and links to writings, websites and videos to explore if you wish to delve deeper or check out sources.

Greg Smith, Series Editor

Chris Baker, Assistant Editor

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Introduction

It is almost exactly forty years since the significant date for urban mission of April 11th, 1981. In south London, youths took to the streets in anger and frustration at racist and heavy policing, in the first of a series of ‘riots’ throughout that summer (Toxteth, Brixton, Handsworth, Moss Side, Leeds, Bradford)—erupting again on a regular basis throughout the 1980s and beyond (Broadwater Farm, 1985; Handsworth/Lozells, 1985, 1991, and 2005; Oldham, Burnley, and Bradford, 2001; Tottenham and other cities, 2011).

Also, that same day, ECUM (The Evangelical Coalition for Urban Mission) was launched in Birmingham. Bringing together initially four organisations—[Frontier Youth Trust](#), Evangelical Urban Training Project (later renamed [Unlock](#)), Shaftesbury Project Inner City Group, and the Evangelical Race Relations Group (later known as Evangelical Christians for Racial Justice)—it adopted a manifesto which was, for many evangelicals of the time, shocking in its political radicalism. The leadership of the coalition included many who were to become legends of British Urban Mission, including: Colin Marchant, Jim Punton, Michael Eastman, Roger Sainsbury, Peter Hall, Neville Black, Richard Farnell, Pat Dearnley, Roger Dowley, Maurice Hobbs and Dave Cave (only a couple now survive). With hindsight this list appears alarmingly white, male and clerically dominated. At the time, I was serving part-time as lay pastor of a tiny Methodist Church, dwarfed by the surrounding tower blocks of Canning Town looking after a congregation of twenty, older East Enders and a few polytechnic students, running very informal after school activities and editing *Rabbit*, an ecumenical community newspaper. On the way home from Birmingham in the Mayflower minibus I remember our group hearing news coming through of what was happening in Brixton. We reflected that we were not surprised, that we had sympathy for the powerless youngsters who were expressing their frustration, and we joked that at least as far as the authorities were concerned, we all had a plausible alibi.

This *Urban Tract* has emerged out of recent conversations between a group of old friends and colleagues who have long been involved in urban mission, ministry, research and reflection. We are an ageing group—I have known Derek Purnell for over thirty years and Paul Keeble for nearly as long—and we have all wandered through the urban wilderness for around forty years. We would not want to portray the inner city as an arid desert; there are plentiful supplies of manna and quails, and here and there you find a green oasis. But in relation to the church as a whole, and particularly the evangelical church, it can still feel a marginal place, where heroic pioneer spies are sent out to survey the land and encounter giants. Or, worse, it is the liminal space into which the scapegoat is driven, carrying the missional guilt of the wider church. It is now fifty years since the founding of the Urban Theology Unit by John Vincent (now transformed into the [Urban Theology Union](#)), and the work of David Sheppard in Canning Town, recorded in his ground-breaking theological memoir *Built as a City*.¹

In the meantime, the inner city has changed. Yet it is still neglected and ignored by the majority of Christians. As [Urban Presence](#)—the Manchester based charity that Derek and Paul founded in 1997 and through which much has been achieved—winds down its operations, we are conscious of the need to pass on the baton to a new generation.

In this context we want to reflect on the work that has been done, the learning that has been necessary, the changing social context, the joys and disappointments, our discerning of the way God has been at work and the challenge that remains. The focus will be on London and the North West of England.

London, especially East London where I lived and worked for twenty-seven years, and where we still also have connections, is an area which has long been the test-bed of urban mission practice. Meanwhile, Manchester was the ‘Shock City’ of the 19th century as described and theorised by Engels and Marx, the city where William Temple served as bishop in the 20th century, and where our late colleague John Atherton lived well into the 21st century. It was also the city where another of our inspiring mentors Kenneth Leach grew up and, after forty years of ministry in

¹ This was the book I was clutching in my hand on a hot summer day in 1975 as I travelled on the District line to Upton Park on the way to an interview for my first post as a trainee community worker with the Newham Community Renewal Programme.

East London, retired and died. Liverpool, its rival, was arguably the ‘Shock City’ of the late 20th century, from the age of the Beatles, through the Toxteth Riots, the era of Shepard and Warlock to the regeneration of its Docks. While we would not presume to talk much about Merseyside, we will extend our boundaries in the light of experience from the wider region, including the Lancashire towns of Preston, Blackpool, Blackburn and Morecambe, where I have recently worked.

What do we mean by urban?

Before reviewing the history of urban mission in its context over forty years we need to define what is meant by the term ‘urban’ in the UK context. Urban mission and ministry, as we understand it, covers contexts which have at least one of the following characteristics:

1. a concentrated settlement with a large population, maybe 50,000+
2. a diverse population in terms of social class, ethnicity and religion
3. concentrated, high levels of poverty and deprivation

In many situations, especially in the poorer areas of the largest cities where we have worked, these three features will intersect. However, there are many other types of area that meet only one or two of these criteria, but which fall within the scope of our reflections. Each will have distinctive local characteristics, and it is important for urban mission practitioners to study the features of the British towns and cities where they live and work in all their variety of demographics, economics, regional connections and politics.²

² To explore the demographic and economic characteristics of urban areas of England and Wales in maps, the [Datashine Census](#) website is a brilliant tool, although it is based on rather dated information from the 2011 census—while these links cover [Scotland](#) and, in a rather more clunky format, [Northern Ireland](#).

Chapter 1

40 Years of Urban Mission

1.1 The 1980s: Riots, Reaction, Religion and Re-generation

The Brixton events of April 1981 certainly triggered a reaction in both state and church and set off a chain of activity that focused on the concept of urban regeneration, which, as [Rob Furbey](#) pointed out in 1999, had both religious and secular connotations. The two photos of the Isle of Dogs from the Greenwich Observatory—the first taken in 1978, and the second in 2020—allow us to ponder in what sense London Docklands has been ‘born again’ (see [Figure 1.1](#) and [Figure 1.2](#)). I remember, as someone living and doing community work in the next borough, not only the rapid development from 1980, but also the struggle of existing local communities on the island and other Dockland neighbourhoods as they were overwhelmed by global capital but shared little of it. This period marked the beginning of four decades of renewal for [Docklands](#) and other abandoned industrial sites across London. Merseyside, Tyneside, and other cities in the North of England and the Midlands were also impacted, usually with an emphasis on high value waterfront locations, such as docks, riversides, and canal basins.

The 1982 [Scarman report](#) into the Brixton riots concluded that, ‘the disorders in Brixton cannot be fully understood unless they are seen in the context of the complex political, social and economic factors which brought them about’. This included the significant residential segregation of large cities, with ethnic minorities concentrated in multiply deprived inner-city areas and working class white residents being



Figure 1.1: Greenwich Park and the Isle of Dogs, 1978. Image from [Christopher Hilton \(CC BY-SA 2.0\)](#).

gradually relocated from ‘slum’ areas to modern, more peripheral council estates, which were soon released for owner occupation. It was also a time of overtly racist policing, with black communities, and young men in particular, liable to discriminatory stop and search under the ‘sus law’, targeted racist violence from some officers, and malicious prosecution in cases where they had been victims rather than offenders—all of which is vividly described in Leroy Logan’s [book](#) and Steve McQueen’s *Small Axe* [film](#). Mike Leroy was commissioned by ECUM to research the riots in Liverpool from a Christian perspective (see p. 10 of this issue of *Third Way* from 1984; the magazine cover gives a graphic image indicating the salient issues of the period).

The street disturbances of 1981 provoked major government policy interventions associated with Michael Heseltine, Secretary of State for the Environment 1979–83. His initial focus was on Liverpool, where he commissioned the first of five National Garden Festivals to be held in in 1984. He arranged for Liverpool to receive unused government grants from other cities (from the Urban Programme), although the money was less than had been clawed back from Liverpool through council spending cuts. He also played an important role in the redevelopment of Albert Dock, and the



Figure 1.2: Greenwich Park and the Isle of Dogs, 2020. Image from [Marathon](#) (CC BY-SA 2.0).

development of Wavertree Technology Park. Later, Heseltine undertook a pivotal role in the development of Urban Development Corporations (*City Cries*, Spring 1989, p. 9), directly appointed by the minister and overriding local authority planning controls to spend government money on infrastructure. This was a controversial measure in Labour strongholds such as East London, Merseyside, and North East England. He also obtained a Treasury grant of £77 million to build the Docklands Light Railway.

The Church of England also became worried about the inner cities. Archbishop Robert Runcie's Commission on Urban Priority Areas (ACUPA) recruited members and took evidence from many cities and parishes, and the *Faith in The City* (FITC) report was published in December 1985, with this [summary](#) in the Christian Action Journal. I was involved in researching the state of the church in Newham and produced a [report](#) which was submitted to the commission. I also remember the commissioners visiting Canning Town for a public hearing. On parking his shiny Daimler outside the church, one commissioner heard a couple of local youths call



Figure 1.3: Salford Quays, 1983. Image from [Chris Allen](#) (CC BY-SA 2.0).

out, ‘Look after your car, gov’nor?’, but failed to recognise the tradition of the junior protection racket.

Faith in The City has been described as the last hurrah of both the political consensus around the welfare state, and of the role of the Church of England as an honest and influential broker between government and people—a position which had been established during the Second World War by Archbishop William Temple. The report contained thirty-eight recommendations to the church and twenty-three to the government and nation. On publication it was dismissed by a government source as ‘[naïve Marxism](#)’—but only the first word was a sound assessment. For this was the era of Thatcher’s juggernaut of radical reform, involving the great neoliberal restructuring of the economy, which meant the demise of manufacturing, mining, and the docks, the ‘Big Bang’ deregulation of the City of London, the sale to tenants of council housing, and the privatisation of publicly owned industries and utilities. The ideology demanded the transfer of social risk from society (which there was ‘no such thing as’) to individuals and families. The Left engaged in many struggles, largely in vain; for example, supporting the great miner’s strike (1984-85), and campaigning against the abolition of Metropolitan Local Authorities. The mid 1980s saw the



Figure 1.4: Salford Quays, 2017. Image by Greg Smith.

next round of disturbances in Brixton, Birmingham, and Broadwater Farm (October 1985). Christians and others were involved in the beginning of the [Sanctuary Movement](#), as activists tried to prevent the deportation of [migrants and asylum seekers](#) such as Viraj Mendez and Marion Gaima in the face of increasingly harsh and racist immigration legislation.

The church response in the late 1980s was an activist one. Within a year or so of the report's publication the Church of England had set up the Church Urban Fund with a £20 million endowment.¹ At the national level, Methodists, Baptists and other denominations launched parallel urban initiatives and funding streams and appointed Presidents with strong inner-city credentials. There were lots of local spin-off reports, including *Faith in the City of Birmingham*, *Faith in Our City*, Liverpool, and *Faith*

¹ I remember at the launch service in Westminster Abbey where the proceedings were enlivened by a South London vicar by the name of Sentamu. He introduced his parish youth gospel choir who performed with gusto in a style previously unheard in such hallowed courts.



Figure 1.5: Docklands Light Railway. Image by Greg Smith.

in Leeds. During the next decade there was a torrent of urban mission and ministry publications including journals such as *City Cries* magazine and the urban bulletin which emerged from the *Christians in Industrial Areas* newsletter.²

A number of theologians and practitioners, such as Roger Dowley, John Vincent, and Kenneth Leech, worked hard to develop a corpus of urban theology, which I tried to summarise and review in my 2013 *Rough Guide*. Meanwhile, most academic theologians remained relatively quiet and aloof (exceptions included *Theology in the City* (1989) by Anthony Harvey, reviewed [here](#) by Nigel Biggar, and *Urban Theology* (1998) by Michael Northcott). Urban practitioners faced many frustrations when they attempted to make urban concerns mainstream in clergy training colleges. Faith In The City recommended setting up contextual urban placements in

² See this [resource list](#) from 1988, which had grown in two or three years to [this list](#). Many of the publications from the period are accessible in my personal archive in this public [google drive](#).

theological colleges, and there was a fertile period when some significant long-term relationships were established: Westcott/Manchester, Cuddesdon/Sheffield, Salisbury/London, Durham/Gateshead, and from Methodist colleges in Newham and Tower Hamlets (Newman, 2010; Dunmow, 2009). However, from 1975 to the present day, the [Urban Theology Union](#) (UTU) in Sheffield was the ‘go to’ centre for learning the theology and practice of urban mission.

This was also a time of local and national networking of urban mission practitioners (Smith, [unpublished paper](#), 1992). This was aided considerably by technological developments in personal computing, which allowed small organisations to develop databases and mailing lists to communicate with their constituency. ECUM was instrumental in setting up network groups in London (in which the vibrant and growing megachurch network [ICTHUS](#) and the London Baptist Association were key players). Similar activities spread to the regions and other nations of the UK, as well as through topic groups for housing professionals, Christian local politicians across all parties, and those developing printed evangelistic and teaching materials for non-book people. [Frontier Youth Trust](#) (FYT) had development officers and thriving networks of Christian youth workers in all the city regions of the UK. In London, ecumenical [Borough Deans’](#) groups brought together senior church leaders concerned for the urban church and its communities. [Church Action on Poverty](#), a campaigning group which continues to the present day was set up. Its first director was John Battle, and its second Paul Goggins, who both went on to become Labour MPs. Racial Justice was high on the agenda with [Evangelical Christians for Racial Justice](#) (ECRJ) having a membership of hundreds, paid staff, and a hard hitting magazine. It was part of a broad Alliance that included the [Catholic Association for Racial Justice](#), the Methodist [Zebra Project](#), Christians Against Racism and Fascism, and the [Community and Race Unit](#) at the British Council of Churches (BCC, later re-branded CTBI), which was influential within the Evangelical Alliance’s processes to [build bridges](#) with Black Majority churches. Not that this was without controversy, for example when the EA went into partnership with the Tory government and set up its Evangelical Enterprise project (see p. 6 ff. of [City Cries](#) 19). The BCC also set up a Church Community Work Resource Unit and resourced community development with conferences and publications such as *Changing the Agenda* which included [my chapter](#). Indeed, it was a time for lots of conferences and gatherings in which ECUM was involved, including: ‘Seeds of Hope’ in Brixton in 1985; local events in Birmingham, Liverpool and Leeds; a national gathering in Handsworth in 1989 called ‘Forgotten in the City’; a ‘London Lives’ event in Hoxton in 1990; and

a ‘United in Manchester’ event in 1991. Most important of all was the UK tour in 1987 by Ray Bakke, International Urban Consultant for the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelisation, which was followed by the publication of *The Urban Christian*. Regular annual conferences of FYT, ECRJ, and Church Action on Poverty were well attended, and the Evangelical Urban Training Project (now [Unlock](#)) established its annual showcase: a fundraising [sponsored walk](#) through various inner city neighbourhoods of the capital. ECUM also carried out research in partnership with the British Church Growth Association in a national project called [God at Work in the Inner City](#).

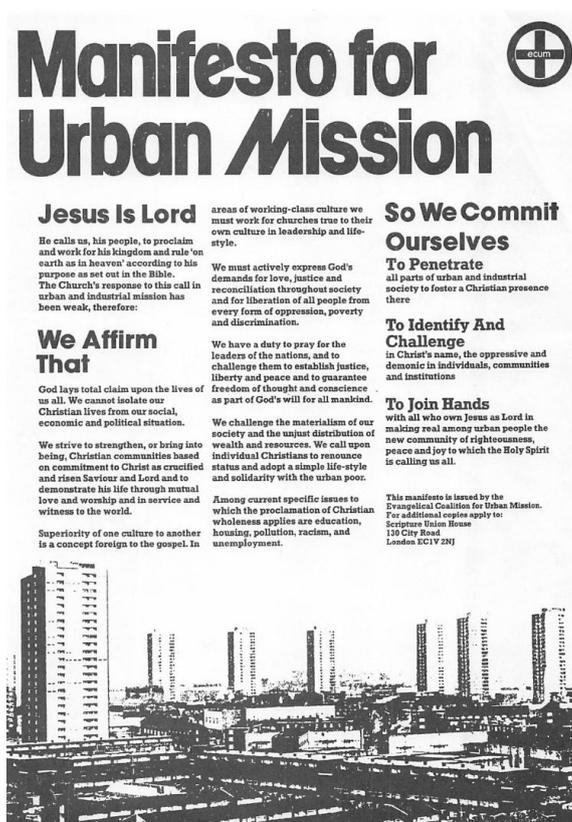


Figure 1.6: Manifesto for Urban Mission issued by the Evangelical Coalition for Urban Mission, 1981. Image by Greg Smith.

1.2 The 1990s: Projects and Partnerships

The Berlin Wall fell in November 1989, Nelson Mandela was released from jail in February 1990, and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 led to the first Gulf

War. In the UK, the new decade began with the Poll Tax riots in the spring and the departure of Margaret Thatcher in November. There were further urban disturbances in the early 1990s—years which were also marked by IRA bomb attacks in Warrington (February, 1993), the City of London (April, 1993), London Docklands (February, 1996), and Manchester Arndale Centre (June, 1996). The Docklands bomb targeted the heart of the government's flagship urban regeneration area and the Manchester attack was the trigger for a massive regeneration of the city centre.

In the 1990s, the policy of inner city regeneration gathered pace with London's [Docklands Light Railway](#) expanding, and the developments of [Albert Dock](#) in Liverpool, [Salford Quays](#) in Manchester, [Cardiff Bay](#), and Newcastle's Tyne quayside being leading examples. The economy had a major setback after the exit from the EU's Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) and the subsequent recession—followed by extremely high interest rates and negative equity for many homeowners. However, by the middle of the 90s there were signs of economic growth, led by financial services in the City of London, cultural industries, and the service sector. The trickle down of benefits to the urban poor, however, was hard to see. Racism continued to raise its ugly head. [Stephen Lawrence](#) was murdered in April 1993, though it took until 1999 for the [MacPherson report](#) to call out institutional racism in the police, and a conviction of the killers was only secured in 2012. Meanwhile, there were continuing issues around immigration and asylum leading to several churches offering sanctuary to people under threat of deportation.

A hugely significant moment was when the Internet emerged as a phenomenon of modern life and early adopters sent their first email. There was a slow emergence of Third Way politics in a renewed Labour Party, and the ethos of partnerships with other stakeholders even filtered through to the Major government, who set up, among other bodies, the Inner Cities Religious Council. All this was leading to the Blair election victory in 1997, which was soon followed by Scottish and Welsh devolution, and the Good Friday agreement in Northern Ireland.

Meanwhile, in the Church of England, agendas were dominated by the decision to ordain women—the first ordinations being in 1994—though women had been playing an important, if unsung, role in Urban Priority Area (UPA) church ministry and leadership for many years. Church Urban Fund (CUF) [grant giving](#) was at its zenith leading to some critics suggesting there was a new gospel offering 'salvation by projects'.

In East London, the 1990s saw the beginning of broad-based community organising,



Figure 1.7: Gujarat Hindu Centre, Preston. The building was part-funded by government urban regeneration programmes in the late 1990s. Image by Greg Smith.

as pioneered by Saul Alinsky in Chicago. With backing from CUF ([Furbey et al. 1997](#)), and initially branded as The East London Citizens Organisation (TELCO), the group based in Newham and Tower Hamlets flourished before eventually developing into London Citizens and [Citizens UK](#). In 1991 I left ECUM and started a new job with [Aston Charities Community Involvement Unit](#) as community research officer, undertaking action and participatory research alongside the local Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector. I was responsible for initiating and supporting a number of poverty alleviation [projects](#) linked with local churches. The most memorable were NOSH (Newham Organisation For Stopping Hunger)—which for several years ran a grassroots community lunch club providing a cheap cooked meal for individuals and families struggling with life on a low income—and the Forest Gate Baby Bank—which provided donated clothes, prams, and child safety equipment to parents of very young children. A memorable moment was the day I went to a meeting with the senior management of the East London Health authority to pitch for funding, and, because of childcare problems, had to take along my own six-month-old daughter. Her gurgling and cute, dimpled smile ensured that we left the meeting

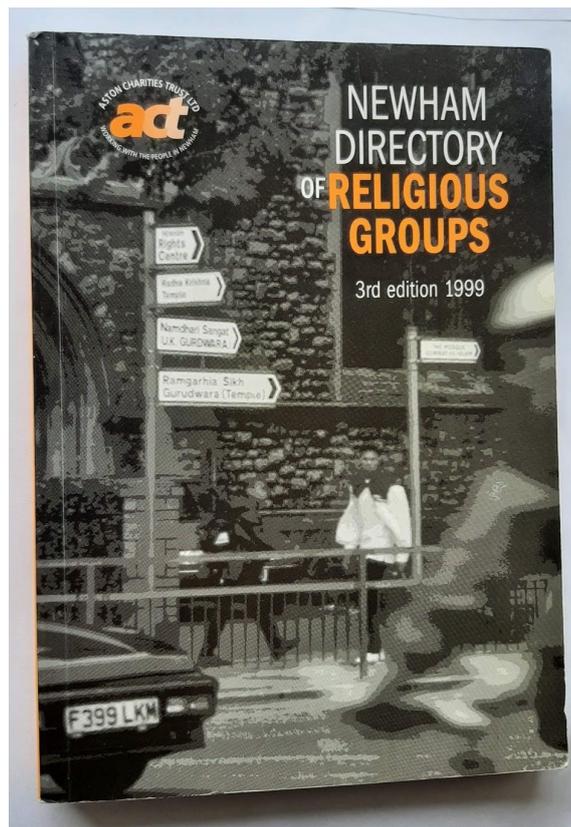


Figure 1.8: Newham Directory of Religious Groups. Image by Greg Smith.

with a promise of £30,000 funding for the project!

Perhaps the most significant urban-mission-related project I worked on was mapping the ever-changing faith groups of the borough. This led to the publication of three editions of the [Newham Directory of Religious Groups](#), a series of [articles](#) in academic books and journals, and my theological reflection *The Christ of the Barking Road*. By this time, databases on office computers were becoming more sophisticated and powerful and the Newham work led to a partnership with colleagues employed by the Barnardos CANDL project, producing directories for the adjoining boroughs of Hackney and Tower Hamlets. This research traced a mushrooming growth of mainly African Pentecostal churches operating in shop fronts, community centres, redundant churches, and warehouses alongside the congregations, mosques, mandirs and gurudwaras of other faith communities. On the wider academic plane this coincided with, and fed into, growing interest in globalisation and religion ([Smith 2000](#)), and writing about global urban mission. The title of Andrew Davey's 2002 book *Urban Christianity and Global Order* resonated with Temple's wartime classic *Christianity*

and Social Order.

In the cities and urban churches of the UK there were several encouraging developments. In Manchester, Derek Purnell and Paul Keeble, who were already involved in inner-city communities and churches, discovered they had very similar ideas about the need to support Christian ministry in such areas, and the need to make the wider church aware of the urban situation. Building on existing evangelical networks in the city in 1996, and after seeking advice from several respected Christian leaders whose response was uniformly positive, they formed Urban Presence.

In many other places Christians were intentionally moving in to live alongside, serve and evangelise local communities. Some church planting initiatives were under way, for example through the Baptist [Urban Expression](#) movement from 1997. Youth evangelism was high on the agenda though networks like the Mustard Seed Missions in London and the [Message Trust](#) started by Andy Hawthorne and colleagues in Manchester in 1988, leading to their planting of the first [Eden Network](#) team in 1997. [Christians Against Poverty](#) which has grown to become the leading Christian debt and money counselling service, reaching far beyond urban areas, was founded in Bradford by John Kirkby in 1996.

Following visits by ECUM members, led by Michael Eastman, to the biennial [Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education](#) (SCUPE) congresses in Chicago, a vision emerged for a UK Urban Congress, and the First [Jesus in the City Congress](#) took place in Liverpool in 1995, followed by Belfast in 1998.

1.3 2000-2010: The Noughties

The new millennium saw a decade with New Labour in government and of relative prosperity for many. Inner City communities were almost overwhelmed by regeneration schemes like [New Deal for Communities](#). Arts projects such as Sage Gateshead, sports events such as the Commonwealth Games in Manchester 2002, or expanding University education such as the University of East London (UEL) Docklands campus in Newham or the University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN) in Preston played a leading role. I began the decade working for UEL on a research project on [Faith in Urban Regeneration](#), and from 2003-2006 served as a community board member of the [AvenCentral](#) Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) programme in Preston.

In the summer of 2001 tensions between largely Pakistani Muslim and largely white



Figure 1.9: The Sage Gateshead and Tyne Millennium Bridge. Image by Greg Smith.

working-class communities erupted in street disturbances and riots in several former mill towns in the north of England—Oldham, Burnley, and Bradford, in particular. The framing of these ‘riots’ by the [Cantle Report](#) as the outcome of ‘parallel lives’, rather than the result of [provocation](#) by far right groups drove the government to develop and promote policies around ‘social cohesion’. But hardly had the smoke drifted away over the Pennines before clouds of flame, smoke and dust swirled through Manhattan in the lethal attacks that became known as 9/11. The global impact of this event led to a decade or more of wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Syria and terrorist outrages in countries including Spain, France, Pakistan, and the London bombings of 7/7 in 2005. Faith identity became a major issue in politics, as did a concern for national security, while the far-right BNP had a measure of success in local and European [elections](#) in districts adjacent to sizeable Muslim communities. Wars in the Middle East resulted in an increasing flow of asylum seekers (which peaked in 2016), though the UK made the process of settlement extremely difficult. However, the numbers seeking asylum were small compared with the numbers of migrants from the European Union granted free movement for work. Large scale settlement from countries such as Poland, Slovakia and the Baltic states, and more recently Romania and Bulgaria, made a noticeable impact on demographics and on streetscapes, not only in big cities but in small towns and rural agricultural areas right across the UK. The prosperity was too good to last and speculation in the

complex workings of global capital markets produced a bubble which burst in the financial crash of 2008. Rapid action by Western treasuries and central banks to bail out numerous international banks and financial institutions prevented a sudden meltdown of the whole world system, though the longer-term consequences continue to this day.

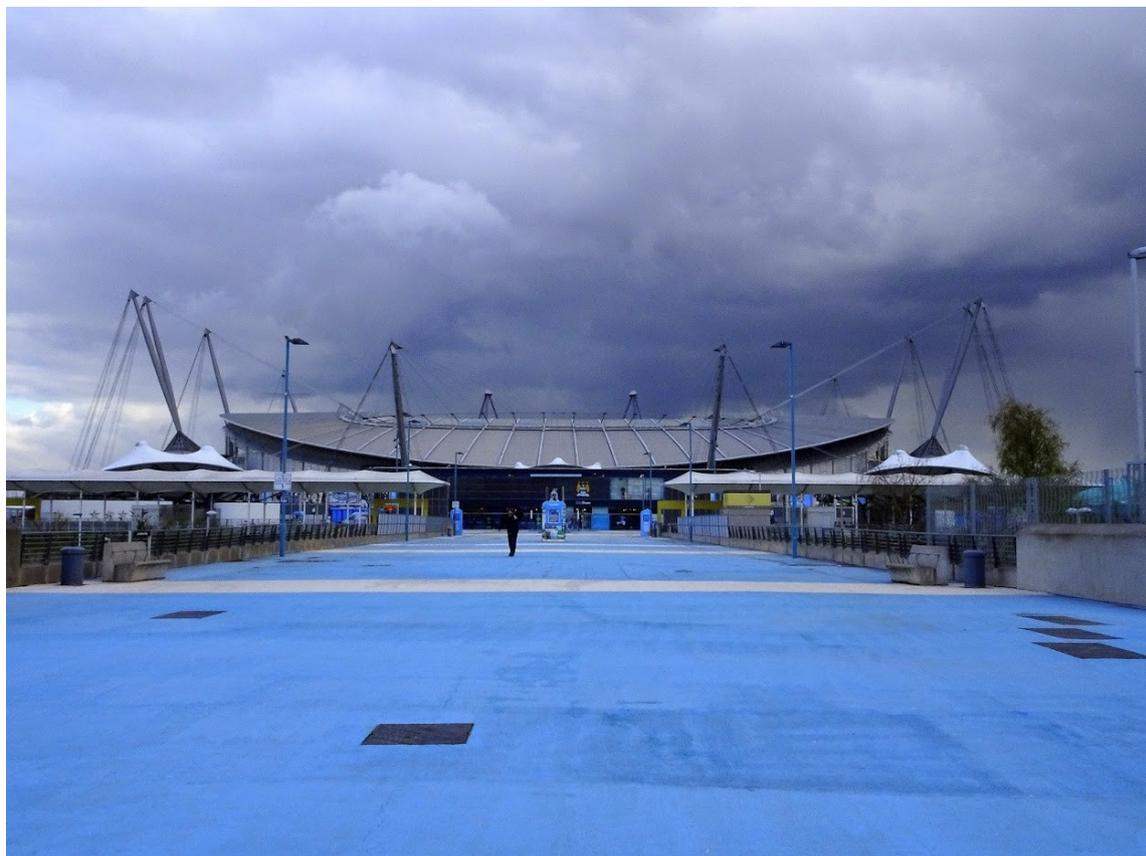


Figure 1.10: Commonwealth Games Stadium, Manchester, now the home of Manchester City Football Club. Image by Greg Smith.

In 2004-5, the Church of England working in partnership with the Methodist Church marked 20 years since *Faith In The City* by setting up a new commission on Urban Life and Faith. I had some involvement in research for this commission, feeding in information about the situation in Preston. The *Faithful Cities* report, published in 2006, concluded that the poor were missing out on regeneration and suggested that ‘building faithful capital requires even more—a willingness to cooperate with God’s plan for humanity’. Discourse patterns had changed since 1985, from Christendom assumptions towards talk about ‘people of goodwill and all those who believe in God’. Rather than provoking government outrage in the way that *Faith In The City* had done, the tone and politics resonated closely with New Labour’s Third

Way thinking. Within the church there was some useful commentary, for example by Elaine Graham and Stephen Lowe in their book *What Makes a Good City* and a study course ‘[What makes a good community?](#)’ by a former Newham colleague Martin Wallace, who, by 2007, was Bishop of Selby.

As I wrote in an unpublished [review](#), the concept of ‘faithful capital’ had been introduced in this report as an extension of Robert Putnam’s conceptual framework of ‘social capital’ which was so popular at the time with policy makers. A 2005 William Temple Foundation [report](#) appears to be a stepping stone towards the notion of faithful capital in that Chris Baker and Hannah Skinner distinguish between spiritual capital, the motivations and spiritualities which drive individuals and groups towards collective worship and social action, and religious capital, which consists of the social norms, rituals, relationships, and institutional structures which equip faith communities for social involvement and political relevance. This was further developed in Baker’s 2009 book *Hybrid Church in the City*.

My review also noted that there was little to be found in *Faithful Cities* on church life. Therefore, it was not surprising that the report was somewhat of a damp squib and is now out of print and impossible to access online. In consequence, Adrian Newman, whom I had known and worked with when he was a curate in Newham in the 1980s, following a sabbatical shortly before he was appointed Bishop of Stepney wrote:

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 [...] Yet, in parallel to that movement, urban ministry appears to have dropped below the radar of the Church of England. (Newman, 2010, unpublished)

Nonetheless, Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity was making some impression in metropolitan areas. Soul Survivor and the Message Trust sponsored a number of short term summer festivals and youth evangelism events (such as [Festival Manchester](#), 2002, and [Soul in the City](#), London, 2004 and 2006). They proposed to serve these efforts by bringing thousands of young people from their conferences to 12 days of coordinated activity, established in partnership with local churches. [Street Pastors](#) was pioneered in south London in 2003 by Les Isaac as a ‘Church response to

urban problems’—specifically gang crime. Since then, they have trained over 12,000 street and prayer pastors to cover more than 240 towns and cities around the UK. Paul Keeble and Urban Presence played a key role in initiating and resourcing the Manchester team. (There’s also the similar [Street Angels](#), part of [Christian Nightlife Initiatives](#) (CNI) Network). Other ministries with a concern for reducing urban crime emerging in this period were the eXcel Project (XLP)’s youth work and [Redeeming Our Communities](#).

[Trussell Trust](#) began to work in the UK too, opening the first food bank in Salisbury after they were contacted by a British mother who was struggling to feed her children. Longer term urban mission projects continued and were consolidated with the growth of the Eden Network and Urban Expression teams. The Evangelical Alliance worked hard to resource and network urban mission and social action projects promoting Christian Action Networks in various cities and towns, including Newham, Manchester, and Preston, and the GWEINI network in Wales. There were further Jesus in the City congresses in Leeds (2000), Glasgow (2004), and Bristol (2006). Erica Dunmow, a leading urban mission networker, summarised the urban mission development scene of the decade in a chapter in this [collection](#). During the second half of the decade I was employed as community coordinator for the Salvation Army in their newly built centre in [Preston](#). From this period I produced a contextual and biblical reflection piece based on the work from Preston: *The Christ of Fishergate Hill* and a more academic article on ‘[Faith and Volunteering in the UK](#)’.

1.4 From 2010 to 2020

This was the decade of the Cameron coalition, followed by a Tory majority government from 2015 and the age of austerity. The recession that followed the financial crisis and the banking bailouts bit deep and the policies of austerity led to growing inequality: between London and the rest of the UK, between the high-paid and the low-paid, between the economically active and those relying on welfare benefits, and a growing generational gap between affluent Boomers and precarious Millennials who were existing in and out of the gig economy. Welfare reform, including the 2013 move to Universal Credit and the Bedroom Tax, was accompanied by a new conditionality on welfare, especially for job seekers and the disabled, and which imposed arbitrary sanctions and benefit rate cuts. For the first time since 1945, destitution became a policy used to discipline the ‘undeserving poor’, and with apparently

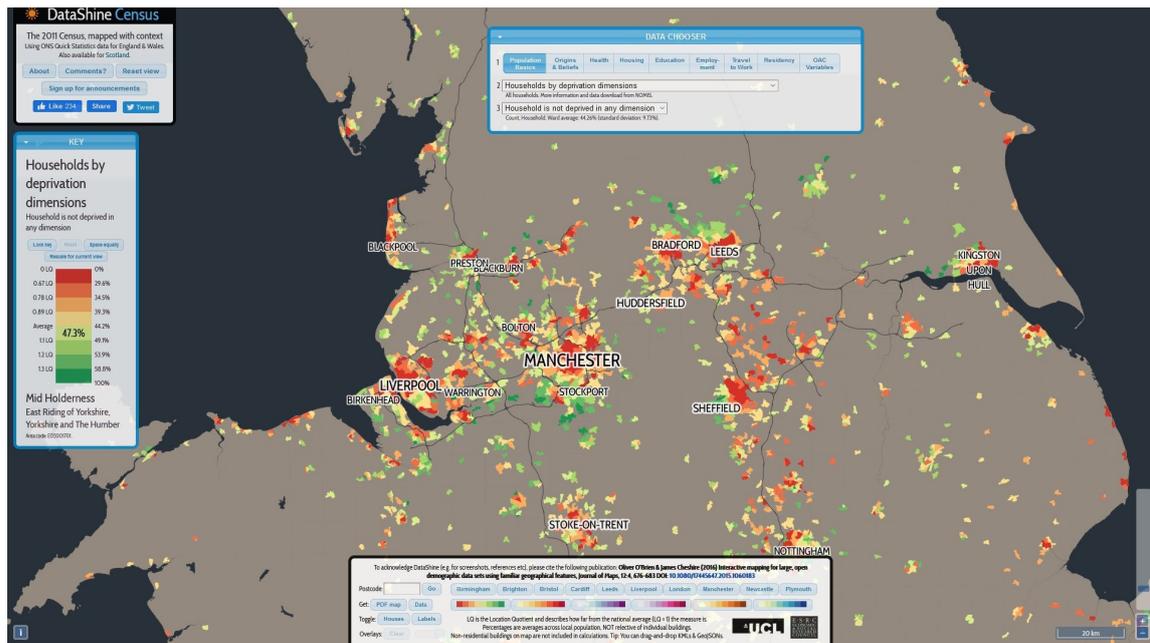


Figure 1.11: Map of multiple deprivation hotspots from the 2011 Census. Note the coastal communities marked in red. Screenshot from the [Datashine](#) website: Oliver O’Brien & James Cheshire (2016) Interactive mapping for large, open demographic data sets using familiar geographical features, *Journal of Maps*, 12:4, 676-683 DOI: [10.1080/17445647.2015.1060183](https://doi.org/10.1080/17445647.2015.1060183)

widespread popular support the government refused to support asylum seekers and recently settled migrants who have no recourse to public funds. Ken Loach’s chilling film [I, Daniel Blake](#) told the story powerfully. Alongside these developments, central government funding was taken away from local authority budgets, especially in the most deprived areas of the North leading to major cuts in essential local services in multiply deprived communities. Low pay and flexible working practices, such as zero-hour contracts, pushed many employed households into deep poverty. The mapping of indices of multiple deprivation tracked how poverty moved from inner city areas to outer estates and the seaside, with places like Jaywick Sands (near Clacton), Hastings, Blackpool, Skegness, Margate, Great Yarmouth, and Cornwall featuring at the bottom of league tables of prosperity. Yet many inner-city areas—in cities such as Manchester, Liverpool, Preston, and parts of London such as Newham—did not shift much in these tables either. The years since 2016 and the Brexit referendum have brought some new challenges, both for politics and urban mission—especially about squaring the social and gospel needs of the ‘left behind’ white working-class communities with the continued experience of racism at personal and institutional levels.

The age of social media and globalisation was now well under way, reinforcing cultural and economic changes. The global environmental crisis climbed up the agenda. Gentrification and growth of city centres and the inner-city fringe housing developments promoted the trend to urban living, across London, and in Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield, and many other cities.

There was an exponential growth of house prices in London and the South, making home ownership unaffordable except for the elite, and driving poor and working-class people out to the periphery. As tensions rose, and with racist policing still evident, disturbances broke out, starting in Tottenham in 2011 and spreading across England. Though the causes were similar to previous riots in the 80s, they were now widely reported as looting, fuelled by an insatiable desire for well-advertised consumer products, in particular electronics.

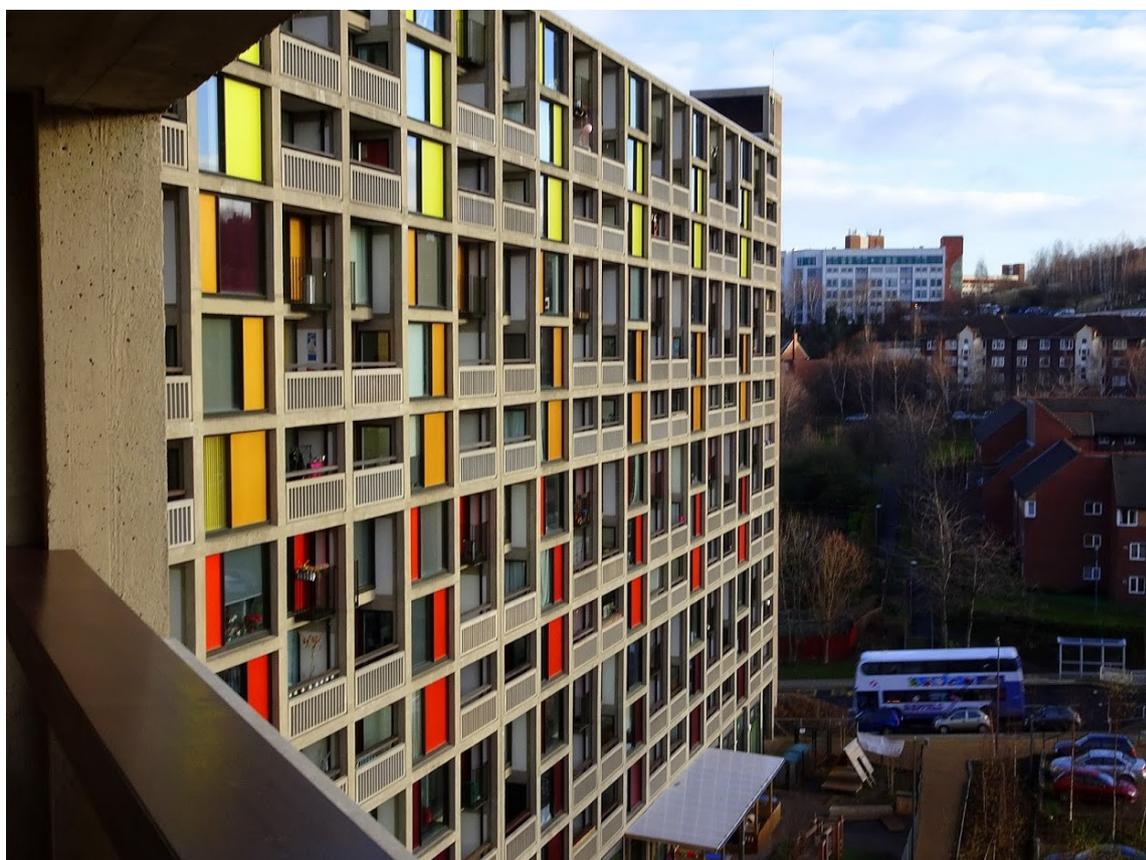


Figure 1.12: Redevelopment of Park Hill Flats, Sheffield, 2017. Image by Greg Smith.

In the midst of this, in 2015, the Syrian refugee crisis erupted across Europe. To its shame, especially in comparison with Germany and Sweden, the UK did very little, accepting only 20,000 families over five years under the UNHCR programme

for resettlement. Others who made it to Britain and claimed asylum faced an increasingly hostile environment—a policy which, by 2017, had developed into the [Windrush](#) scandal whereby many hundreds of older people who had arrived from the Caribbean as children in the 1950s and 1960s, legally but without documents, were liable to loss of their right to work, their access to benefits, or even their freedom to remain in the UK. Among these, 83 people were actually and unjustly deported. The context was growing public concern over immigration, which was perceived to be out of control, while fears were being stoked up by the right wing tabloid press and UKIP, together with the activities of the [English Defence League](#) and its allies, who had taken over the mantle of the declining BNP. This was a rather more subtle form of cultural racism, specifically targeting Muslims, and sometimes adopting Christian iconography and an ideology that can be described as [Christianism](#). This context of white English nostalgia, and what might be described as the provincial revolt, led to the referendum vote for [Brexit](#) and, in the 2019 general election, the collapse of Labour's Red Wall of constituencies in the North of England. A more hopeful note in urban church life was Christian involvement in the emerging [Cities of Sanctuary](#) movement, the hospitality shown and support offered to asylum seekers by numerous [churches](#), and the foundation and growth of congregations serving refugee communities such as [Iranians](#) and [Eritreans](#).

The Cameron coalition government strongly promoted the concept of the [Big Society](#); the cynics among us suspected this was an attempt to get charities and faith communities to cover the gaps in welfare provision resulting from the austerity programme. Churches, especially in the evangelical sector, appeared keen to take up the challenge and, across the country, there was a mushrooming of social projects, often adopting a franchise model based on templates provided by such organisations as the Trussell Trust food banks, CAP Debt Centres and Job clubs, and a range of others promoted and seedcorn funded by the [Cinnamon Network](#).³ The Church Urban Fund (CUF) reinvented itself as its original endowment fund depleted itself, and transformed from a grant giving body to a development agency. It set up the [Together Network](#) funded by private philanthropy, with semi-autonomous joint ventures in around 20 dioceses across England. Alongside this was the government-funded [Near Neighbours](#) scheme

³ Based on some research for the Evangelical Alliance I wrote a critical review outlining the contemporary evangelical contribution to social action published in [Crucible](#), which can be accessed [here](#).



Figure 1.13: Blackpool ‘front side’. Image by Greg Smith.

supporting local multi-faith community cohesion activity in designated areas, and the [Just Finance Foundation](#) promoting financial inclusion and literacy work, such as credit unions, savings clubs, and money management courses for schools and adult groups. I was privileged to work for [seven years](#) in my final post before retirement for Together Lancashire, building, resourcing, and advising ecumenical Christian social action networks and initiatives, mainly in Preston, [Blackpool](#), [Morecambe](#) and the surrounding areas. We brought the local authorities together to reflect on and develop activities in such policy areas as food poverty, housing and homelessness, support for unemployed people, financial inclusion, and asylum seekers and refugees. CUF also partnered in some research on the relationship between social action and urban church growth, published in 2020 as Theos’ Grace Project report *Growing Good*.

Paul Keeble and Derek Purnell were key organisers of a final Jesus in the City congress held in Manchester in 2013. Other key developments in the decade were the revival of the [National Estates Churches Network](#) (NECN), led first by retired bishop Laurie Green, then Andy Delmege, and inspired by the advocacy of Bishop



Figure 1.14: [Blackpool](#), 'back side'. Image by Greg Smith.

of Burnley, Philip North. Concentrating on sustaining and developing mission on (ex) council estates, NECN works largely but not exclusively with Anglican parishes in the places from which most churches and Christians have fled. Citizens UK also expanded with a growing number of chapters being established in various urban centres. Another exciting development, beginning in Scotland, was the [Poverty Truth Commission](#) movement, with its motto 'Nothing About Us – Without Us – Is For Us'. Another emerging urban mission movement, inspired by its US counterpart associated with Tony Campolo, is [Red Letter Christians UK](#). [Urban Life](#) is also an important training agency for mission in marginal places that developed out of Bristol Baptist College.

1.5 2020

And then came 2020, in many ways an unanticipated Sabbath year for the whole world. The COVID-19 pandemic caused panic, bodily distancing that put social life

on hold, and a massive economic downturn from which the world is yet to emerge. Worldwide it was a year of identity politics, often linked to ethno-religious identity, as in the [Black Lives Matter](#) protests of the summer, the Presidential election in the USA, and the last-minute Brexit deal between the UK and the EU. Poverty, inequality, and racial injustice persist, and seem to grow, while metropolitan versus provincial and intergenerational tensions remain unresolved. The next great crisis around climate and the environment is already with us.

Amidst all this, many countries are in lockdown and church buildings are closed for public worship. In some cases, people are demanding and exercising their freedom to meet without much concern for public health risks. We are all ‘Zoomed’—as virtual and hybrid congregations meet online. The recent APPG Faith and Society commissioned report *Keeping the Faith*, conducted by the Faiths and Civil Society Unit at Goldsmiths, University of London, featuring researchers from the William Temple Foundation, reported that churches and other faith communities have played an important part in supporting survival, health and wellbeing through food banks, markets, pantries and meals on wheels. These activities point to the possibility of innovative and more equal forms of partnership and co-production as we move into a post-pandemic world. Commentators are suggesting there may also be a massive long-term change in urban centres, with many people continuing to work from home, commuting less, and lowering demand for public transport. High street shopping has struggled and may be further supplanted by online retailers and doorstep deliveries. The hospitality industry, sports and cultural events, the travel sector and some other service industries may struggle to survive or may need to relocate out to suburbs.

At the time of writing, with everything on pause, no one can predict what the future holds, especially in the field of urban mission and ministry.

Chapter 2

What We Have Learned: Characteristics of Urban Mission and Ministry

So, what we have learned in four decades of reflective practice in urban mission and ministry? Are there distinctive characteristics and key principles that are transferable to new places, new times, and a new generation of practitioners? Here are some suggestions.

2.1 Location, location, location

Maybe the most important point about urban mission is that it is and must be local. For it is in a neighbourhood where most ordinary people, and particularly those who are struggling with poverty, live the majority of their lives—where their family and friendship networks, their children’s schools, and their work opportunities are often centred. Urban deprivation is spatially focussed in ‘undesirable’ neighbourhoods and postcodes and one recognised element of deprivation concerns connections to wider opportunities because of low levels of car ownership and poor or costly public transport. Such areas are often further deprived by the absence of a Christian presence. The strength of the Church of England has been its commitment to the parish, maintaining a foothold in every neighbourhood of the country, though this is often fragile and under-resourced. During the COVID pandemic churches with an existing positive relationship with the local area around where they meet (and a good number of

their members live) have easily been able to serve and partner in provision such as food, on- and off-line wellbeing activities and so on. We need very local and widely inclusive local church communities. As such, the language and style of Latin American ‘base communities’ has long been of interest to urban practitioners. In recent years, urban mission has seen a development of a [New Parish Movement](#) and interest in developing a serious [theology of place](#). However, residential segregation of large cities between the rich and the poor, by ethnicity, by sexuality, and according to other subcultures makes the parish model less than straightforward (see my [review](#) of Martin Robinson’s book).

2.2 Congregations

Church life and the activities of mission, in cities as elsewhere, require there to be viable congregations of Christians, to provide support through finance, offering time in service and prayer support. In the late 20th century, the major denominations often had only remnant congregations: older and often poorer, but faithful, people who had been left behind after slum clearance programmes and the migration of those who had prospered to more affluent areas (often described as ‘redemption and lift’, or ‘left’). Sometimes, churches are propped up by suburban members who had a historic family connection with the church and neighbourhood who commute back in each Sunday. This is far from ideal as it does not usually allow close involvement in the community, sometimes interprets the changing community as a place of decline and despair, and loyalty to traditions can inhibit change. On the other hand, urban areas often have several examples of new churches and ministries, newly planted or replanted (like the Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB) [resource church networks](#)) including, in many places, Black Majority congregations or those serving particular diaspora communities. However, many of these church congregations feel and behave as though they have parachuted in with something of a ‘saviour complex’. They are often gathered congregations drawing people connected through social networks from across wide areas of the city. Smaller ‘[fresh expressions](#)’ also find a place, targeting and serving various subcultural groups from within and beyond the locality. Too often, though, these fresh expressions find it hard to relate to and serve or evangelise established local communities.



Figure 2.1: Congregation of the Parish of the Risen Lord, Preston.
Image by Greg Smith.



Figure 2.2: Congregation of the Parish of the Risen Lord, Preston.
Image by Greg Smith.

2.3 Buildings are important

Without buildings it would be difficult for any church life or mission in the community to continue or grow in our cities. However, they do not need to be traditional parish churches or chapels, which in many cases are unfit for purpose, inflexible, impossible to heat, too large for regular congregations or other activities, and a financial millstone rather than an asset. Yet, in some communities these traditional buildings are an icon with symbolic and heritage value replete with family and community memories, often provoking protests when suggestions are made about closure or redevelopment. Where there are large and growing new congregations serving ethnic minority communities such buildings are much in demand if declared redundant by a denomination, and there are many examples where they have been leased or purchased and are full every Sunday. Other new congregations will acquire warehouses or shopfronts for their activities, or meet in hired rooms in schools, community centres, cinemas, or coffee shops—or in churches of other denominations who have made them available. There are often disadvantages associated with such arrangements, such as the need to move equipment in and out each week, arranging and tidying away furniture, not having a permanent address with a visible local profile, and the risk of bumpy relationships with the owners of the building. Over the last half century there have been many church building redevelopment or rebuilding projects, some of which have been very successful and breathed new life into a congregation and community. The best examples are designed for flexible multiple use seven days a week, with a welcoming entrance area, perhaps with a coffee bar. Some have incorporated a housing element on the site; some have been developed in partnership with a school.

My own experience suggests that, in urban settings where both money in the local economy and Christians in the local neighbourhood are in short supply, it is best to be modest in building plans. In Preston, for example, our inner-city parish managed to refurbish our small mission hall for extended community use and run a programme of outreach activities within the capacity of a small ageing congregation. These included a job club, youth cafe, parent and toddler group, and cafe church, while many other groups such as the residents' association, addiction support groups, and two independent churches rented the building for their weekly sessions. In the same period, I was also involved with two projects which were overambitious. The first was a Catholic cathedral-size building which was totally redeveloped for community and sports use in the fat years of regeneration funding but could never be sustainable as

a local community facility and had to be taken over and incorporated into the local sixth form college. The second was a city centre Baptist church, which had a Grade 2 listed building on a prime site, but a tiny ageing congregation which had shrunk to only a dozen members by 2008. A group of us spent three years trying to dream up ways in which Christian work could continue on the site but failed to find a viable way forward. The church decided to close, the building was put up for sale and, after lying empty for some years, was bought and developed into a restaurant by a well-known chain. A third example is of a totally new building, erected to replace a fading Victorian mission hall by the Salvation Army centre, where I worked for five years from 2005. It was a superb modern building with great facilities for worship, for conferences, for community groups to meet and for the local corps to offer its social outreach through projects like the open kitchen for homeless and rootless people, the food bank, the youth club, and the community IT suite offering computer literacy courses to older people and the unemployed. The one major problem was location. It had been built close to the city centre, in the heart of the university quarter, which meant that while there were thousands of students passing by each day the local neighbourhood community on the former council estate was feeling overwhelmed and displaced. As a result, there was only a small and shrinking population within walking distance of the building.



Figure 2.3: St Mary's, Plaistow, London. New church built on the old church site in the 1980s. Image from [John Salmon](#) (CC BY-SA 2.0).



Figure 2.4: St Matthew's, Preston, built in the 1880s. Architects are currently working on re-building plans. Image by Greg Smith.

2.4 Making the word flesh and moving into the neighbourhood

Urban mission and ministry needs to be incarnational in lives dedicated to Christian service and witness at street level. Paul, Derek, and I have all lived most of our adult lives in ordinary housing in inner city neighbourhoods and sought to build friendships and good neighbour relationships; to do life with those around us. We have long got over any Messiah complex we may once have had and learned to just get on with everyday life while trying to keep close to Jesus. We know through our wider networks hundreds of Christians who have either moved into such areas and stayed a lifetime, or (more heroically than us) have stayed where they were born and raised and chosen not to move out when they could. Some are church leaders or community workers; some have professional careers as teachers, medics and even as national politicians; many work in more demanding roles as carers, shop workers, or cleaners with little job security or financial reward. Many have raised

children in these communities, some of whom have become second generation urban missionaries. We welcome movements such as the Eden Network, who challenge young Christians to move in, live deep, and stay for the long term. It will never be stress free, but we have also found many joys. We believe such an incarnational approach will make more long-term impact for the gospel and the kingdom than any ‘hit and run’ evangelism, short term placements of clergy or mission teams, or trying to keep a struggling urban church going by relying on loyal suburban Christians who visit on Sundays.

2.5 Urban ministry takes place in a context of ethnic and religious diversity

Practitioners will thrive when they recognise and work with the grain of pluralism in communities and churches. Cities are generally multilingual and one encounters a huge variety of diaspora churches and missions. At a minimum, tolerance is essential and collaboration is desirable. It is likely that appreciation for different theologies and styles of worship will grow if you are open to building relationships with other Christians. There is no need to compromise on convictions if we can manage real disagreements honestly and graciously, while working collaboratively on issues and problems where we share concern and an approach to finding solutions. In church life a very broad ecumenical vision going beyond the traditional Council of Churches/Churches Together format is important. Furthermore, Christian urban practitioners should and will find themselves engaging in some way with individuals and organisations from other faiths, in activities together for the common good, and sometimes in direct evangelism and inter-faith dialogue.



Figure 2.5: Blackburn, Lancashire. Image by Greg Smith.

2.6 Networking

This is a crucial skill in urban ministry and life in general. Making progress for the shalom of your community depends very largely on who you know, who you can call on for help, and who you are able to connect with each other. It also helps avoid wasting time on setting up a project or service to meet a particular local need when someone else is offering a similar outreach two blocks away and has capacity to take on more service users. Networking skills are important both within and across local churches and across sectors such as local government, police, NHS providers, and with voluntary community and faith sector organisations and networks. Healthy partnerships can be established and good networks can often be the key to access to funding.

2.7 Holistic mission

Christians working in urban areas come to understand there is no dualistic separation between the material and spiritual spheres, between bodies and souls, or between individuals and the social structures which sustain (or sometimes oppress them). Different churches and ministries are likely to have different priorities and theologies

about the relationship between evangelism and social action, between prayer and practical care, between worship and community involvement. However, most will come to appreciate the truth of General Booth's remarks that, 'You cannot warm the hearts of people with God's love if they have an empty stomach and cold feet', and, 'Faith and works should travel side by side, step answering to step, like the legs of men walking'. The gospel as social justice is expressed theologically very well in this [piece](#) by Adrian Newman.

2.8 Oral rather than written culture

Many communities where urban mission takes place have had relatively low levels of educational achievement over generations, and often those who have gained qualifications have prospered and moved away. The majority of working-class people do not engage with high culture, books, and abstract theoretical language, and few have much experience of church culture, religious language, or knowledge of Scripture, let alone where to find a Bible verse. This does not mean people lack intelligence or interest in ideas and one is sometimes surprised to encounter individuals who are well read or know their way through the Bible. However, it is the spoken forms of language that matter most, in conversation, in worship, in music, in comedy, and in ritual performances such as rap. Linguistic diversity means that we are not always talking about, or talking in, English; there is richness and creativity in bilingualism, in local dialects and in the slang and jargon of sub-cultures, especially amongst the youth. Alongside this there is much creativity to be found in music, drama, visual arts, and crafts. Urban churches can both benefit and contribute by facilitating community arts activities, but can founder if they make middle-class assumptions about literacy in worship and Bible study. For over 40 years Unlock (formerly Evangelical Urban Training Project) has been developing methods and materials to foster Christian learning and discipleship for people who do not do much reading. Their sister organisation [CURBS](#) addresses the same issues in children's ministry in urban settings.

2.9 Urban culture

Because cities are increasingly diverse in so many dimensions (ethnicity, religion, class, generation, gender, subcultures), it is no longer possible to think about mission in terms of crossing single cultural boundaries. That said, there has been a lot of thought and useful commentary about the difference between British middle-class church culture and that of the (white) working classes—some of it from inhabitants from inner-city working-class culture who have become Christians and learned some of the middle-class culture of the church but stayed true to their roots. They have a unique role in mission in aiding cross-cultural communication and mutual understanding which should be valued much more. Natalie Williams has spoken powerfully about her own experience in [this](#) (and other) interviews, in the book *A Church for the Poor*, and in [this blog](#). Jo Mackenzie studied for a PhD in this area and has an academic article freely available [here](#). Derek Purnell’s [book](#) is also a valuable contribution to these discussions. If there is one feature of urban life that seems to apply across the various groups and subcultures it is that life is immediate and spontaneous rather than structured, planned, and scheduled, and that interaction and conversation is usually personal, direct and ‘in your face’.

2.10 Mission with and alongside

We, along with the wider urban mission community, are often seeking to do good TO, or preach AT, people in urban communities, which, rather than being effective, tends to produce dependency and provoke resistance to the Gospel. Paul Keeble published a book in 2017 advocating ‘[mission with](#)’, showing how he has learned to listen to local people before speaking too much, to engage in community development and partnership, and to employ techniques of empowerment. One of these techniques is to accept the skills, energies and offers of voluntary help from local people, even if their lives are a mess, and before they even show much interest in Jesus. Working together builds the relationships and friendships which are the bridges through which faith can be communicated and, in some cases, caught. Al Barrett’s work as a vicar in inner city Birmingham and his doctoral studies in theology have led him to similar conclusions, summarised in [this blog](#). Much of this is consistent with the practice of [Asset Based Community Development](#) (ABCD) in which communities are not thought of as complex masses of needs and problems, but rather as diverse and

capable webs of gifts and assets.

2.11 Transformational, yet struggling

In urban mission there are sometimes moments of miraculous transformation where an individual life is miraculously redeemed for ever. But, more often, personal conversion and redemption is a gradual process, hopefully with two steps forward and only one temporary one back. It's the same with wider community transformation: sometimes improvements are obvious, sometimes they are hard to discern, and sometimes things get worse. Nor is it easy to attribute these to anything we as Christians have done—or indeed that God has done. We encounter and must deal with failure and sin—in ourselves, in other people, in our churches, and in other institutions. We need to come to terms with failure: churches and ministries die and close, individuals sometimes lose their faith, and we see lives and families destroyed by addiction, violence, avoidable ill health, and suicide. Matt Wilson explores such issues in his 2012 book *Concrete Faith* pointing out that in many stories 'it's not (a matter) of overnight transformation; there's been a lot of hard graft'. Anna Ruddick recently published *Reimagining Mission from Urban Places* (2020), based on her doctoral research on how members of Eden Network teams experienced and interpreted ideas about Christian transformation. She found that initial hopes of transformed lives and neighbourhoods by bringing the 'Good News of Jesus' to dark and Godless estates needed to be revised. There was little evidence of large-scale revival producing Christians who would fit into existing forms of church life. Team members, as they increasingly felt at home in their local communities, started to look for smaller signs of change and progress and recognised (as we have done) that it was they themselves who were being changed as God was at work around them. They became more committed to listening and watching for signs of what the Holy Spirit was doing with the people and communities around them and how they could discern and become servants of the *Missio Dei* (Mission of God).



Figure 2.6: School and parish fun day, Preston. Image by Greg Smith.

2.12 Contextual theology

One of the main things that does seem to change with experience of urban ministry is theological framework. This does not mean that convinced evangelicals (or for that matter catholics or liberals) jettison their core convictions or practices but maybe that they become more open and appreciative of alternative perspectives. As evangelicals we have not abandoned the key ideas that conversion to Christ is essential, or that Christ died for our sins. Nor would we reject the authority of Scripture and that it ‘is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness’ (2 Tim 3:16-17). Without jettisoning orthodoxy of belief, we become more concerned with orthopraxis as we follow Jesus, seeking his kingdom in our lives, churches, and communities. We become very aware that we are living ‘in the meantime’, after the resurrection but still in a world spoiled by sin, where we struggle with principalities and powers as we wait for the new age and the new world that is to come.

However, having lived in an urban context, surrounded by poverty and ethno-religious diversity, two things happen. Passages and themes which academic theologians and comfortable suburban Christians may have passed over unnoticed leap out to our eyes. Second, we tend to read and apply Scripture through a different set of (sometimes kaleidoscopic) glasses rather than as abstract doctrine or spiritual guidance for individual, disembodied souls. We have increased sympathy for feminist theologies, black theologies, and liberation theologies as they grapple with Scripture. I think we are also more likely to look at the grand narrative (the big story) of the Bible—and at stories such as the parables of Jesus, his healing ministry, and great events in salvation history such as the Exodus—rather than rely on a scattering of individual verses taken out of context. The method of contextual theology moves us towards group reflection and discussion of the text rather than relying entirely on expository preaching from a pulpit.

2.13 Urban spirituality

With diversity all around, helpful patterns of personal spiritual formation and corporate worship are varied. They are shaped in part, at least, by church culture and tradition as well as by our personalities. The exuberance of Pentecostal and charismatic worship in gospel songs, the responsive engagement with the rhetorical style of preaching, and the awareness of divine anointing brings emotional and spiritual release to many urban Christians. For others, quieter structured liturgy and prayerful contemplation draws them closer to Christ. Some of us are still longing for worship resources, hymns, songs, and forms of prayer that explicitly join the transcendence of God with the experience of everyday city life. For example, in ‘How Great Thou Art’ I want to sing:

When through East Ham or Forest Gate I wander,
and hear the traffic roaring in the street . . .

I still like the countryside, nature, sunsets over the sea, and mountain views, but we need to recognise these are not the only places where God can be found. As a cyclist and erstwhile cycle campaigner Laura Everett’s *Holy Spokes* gets my wheels turning.



Figure 2.7: Bicycle ballet, Preston Guild, 2012. Image by Greg Smith.

2.14 Urban mission is inevitably political

Reflecting on life in urban communities soon leads you to understand that problems and issues experienced locally are often the result of decisions taken by powerful people and institutions, while ordinary residents are relatively powerless. Involvement with community groups inevitably involves politics and engaging with local politicians—ideally in an atmosphere of cooperation, but with honest criticism. Sometimes it demands protest, often directed against central government. It also involves deciding where to place a vote and, for some at least, joining a political party or standing for election. For the most part, the interface between faith and politics is about local grassroots action and bottom-up community organising. Citizens UK offers one useful mechanism for churches to be involved, while the Poverty Truth Commission approach empowers, and offers a voice and public platform to, powerless people. For example, I became involved in local politics, especially campaigning for better provision for cyclists, and was a founder member of a prayer support group for a young local politician who became a councillor, then leader of the council, then MP, and eventually a government minister. My observations of faith involvement in Newham’s local politics are written up in this [paper](#).



Figure 2.8: Community politics at the parish level, Preston, 2015. Image by Greg Smith.

2.15 Equipping leaders

As far back as the *Faith in the City* report in the mid-80s, there were comments from clergy of all denominations that theological training colleges had given them little idea of how to minister in Urban Priority Area parishes. There were also very few ways that urban working-class, or ethnic minority, men who felt called and had gifts for ministry could be selected for ordination. The issue persists to this day with a few significant changes. In 2020, one vicar posted on social media: ‘I also discovered that my training spectacularly failed to equip me... I had a great experience at theological college, and yet had to relearn everything moving to [a working-class parish in an ex-steel town]’.

Since 1994, women in the Church of England have been ordained as priests, and more recently as bishops. Even before that, much of the best church leadership and ministry to be observed in urban areas was female: in some of the Free Church denominations that ordained women, in the Black Majority Pentecostal churches, and

in paid or unpaid roles as deaconesses, youth and community, or pastoral workers. It is also the case that in many local urban community groups it is women who are outstanding leaders.

More flexible forms of training—non-residential, part-time, self-supporting, and local ministry—are now much more common, and some colleges do offer some more practical courses. Yet the complaints about failure to be equipped are still heard. And judging from Azariah France-Williams’ book *Ghost Ship* (2020), the hurdles and discrimination in the Church of England against UKME clergy both before and after ordination remain a scandal. Nor is this issue confined to one denomination. And similar issues affect working-class people and women. Part of the problem has been the insistence on making people more middle-class as part of their training.

More needs to be done to develop local leaders who have an insider knowledge of the localities and cultures in which they serve Christ. Apprenticeship models and in-service training with situational analysis and theological reflection can be very helpful for developing church leadership in urban ministry. There are some encouraging signs that the Church of England, other denominations, and theological training colleges are aware of and are responding to these issues.

Chapter 3

Passing the Baton: What Next?

As we head, post-pandemic, towards a ‘new normal’ for urban society and the church there are exciting opportunities to be grasped. There are also some encouraging signs that a new generation of urban missionaries is emerging. Urban Presence, as it winds down, has produced two videos. The [first](#) summarises what has been achieved and learned, challenging a new generation to become involved. The [second](#) features current activities of their partner agencies in Manchester. There is a need to relate to local people in their cultures, often where many are bumping along together in a single urban neighbourhood.

Yet, even after 40 years, our fear is that most of the church, especially the white evangelical suburban church, does not ‘get it’. As a disciple of Jesus, where you live does matter, and the fact that you are white and middle class does give you privilege and a distinct world view. There is a challenge, at least to some people, to come over and help us, ‘to move in and live deep’ in urban communities for the long term, perhaps as a lifetime vocation. There is also a challenge for Christians born and raised in such places to stay and serve the kingdom where they are.

There is also a wider challenge to the denominations, thriving suburban churches, and well-resourced mission agencies to offer prayer and resources for urban mission and ministry, without seeking to take control of what God is already doing. It saddens us that we have been aware of, and saying, this sort of thing for nearly 50 years—since we sat at the feet of mentors and pioneers like Colin Marchant, Martin Gooder, John Vincent, and others who were not on the streets of Brixton in April 1981.

Sometimes we feel like exiles in the city we are called to work for. And sometimes

when we look out over the city, as Jesus did, we simply weep. But then we turn to the end of the Bible and rejoice in the hope of a new city where we see:

... the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (Rev 22:1-2)

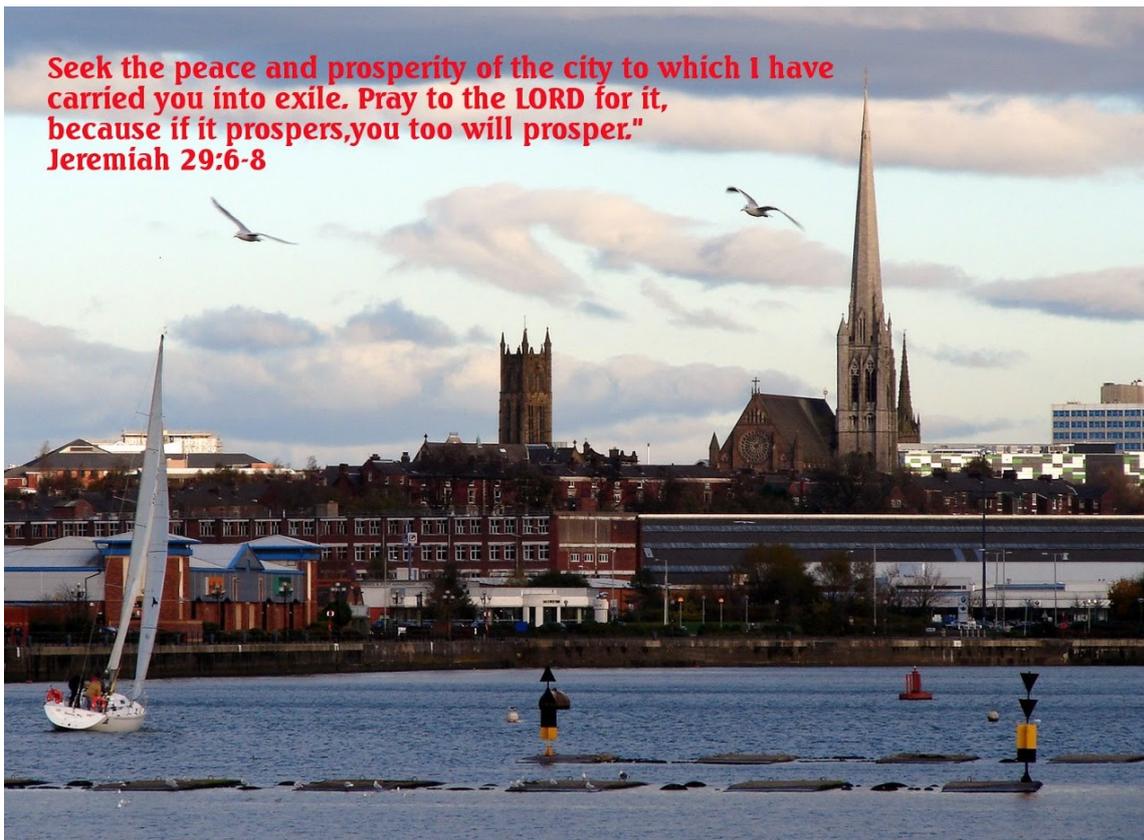


Figure 3.1: Preston Docks. Image by Greg Smith.

Questions for further consideration

- In what sense was the late 1980s a golden age for Urban Mission? If so, how and why has it slipped to the bottom of the church's agenda?
- Why has it been so hard, over more than a century, to establish strong locally rooted Christian congregations in poor urban neighbourhoods, especially among white, working-class people?
- What has been the impact on religious life in urban areas that you know of the growth of minority ethnic communities?
- How should Christians relate to other faith communities and their religious institutions?
- Is there a distinctive Christian approach to social justice that can make a real impact on issues such as poverty and racism?
- What are the theologies, principles, and practices the Church should adopt if it wants to keep a balance between evangelism and social and political action in urban settings?
- How far has urban regeneration in major cities over recent decades brought benefits to local neighbourhoods, communities, and churches?
- How can mission-minded Christians who are not locally born and bred be of greatest use to churches and communities in deprived urban areas?
- How should leaders for churches in urban areas be selected, trained, and supported for ministry?
- What might urban areas and the churches within them look like as we rebuild after the COVID-19 pandemic?

Online Resources

[Greg Smith's Urban Mission Resource Archive](#)

A collection of historic documents and papers from the last 40 years including digitised copies of key journals such as *City Cries* and *Racial Justice*.

[Urban Life](#)

'Urban Life provides practical, local, and accessible training to Christian groups, intentional communities and churches in urban areas and marginalised neighbourhoods.'

[Urban Presence](#)

'Urban Presence is a Christian organisation and UK registered charity seeking to resource Christians, churches, and organisations living and working in inner-city Manchester.'

[Urban Theology Union \(UTU\)](#)

'In 1969, inspired by base communities in South America and New York, Rev'd Dr John Vincent set out to equip and encourage a new generation in the British urban church. The Urban Theology Union continues to have a reputation for radical contextual theology. UTU was built by its members and is re-learning how to be member-led and member-driven: true to its founding vision.'

[Together Network](#)

'The Together Network exists to respond to local issues, supporting and helping communities to tackle the things that matter most to them. As well as developing new ideas it can help churches, organisations and community groups work together effectively and creatively.'

[Unlock Urban](#)

‘Unlock is a Christian charity that was founded in 1972. It exists to help urban churches of any denomination to respond to the challenges in their areas. We are especially concerned with Bible engagement amongst ‘traditional tabloid’ (‘non-book’, ‘oral learners’, or ‘text-shy’) cultures.’

[Eden Network](#)

‘Each and every day, our Eden teams are getting to share the gospel with their neighbours in word and deed.’

[National Estate Churches Network \(NECN\)](#)

‘NECN supports people active in Christian ministry on social housing estates in England and Wales; we do this via a network of local groups plus conferences, estate-specific resources, helpful emails and social media, strategic representation and much more.’

[Red Letter Christians UK](#)

‘Red Letter Christians UK is a relational network for those who want to live for Jesus and Justice. Our focus is connecting and supporting Christian activists and community leaders across the UK. We aim to provide practical tools for developing advocacy and organising skills alongside deepening spiritual resilience.’

[Church Action on Poverty](#)

‘Church Action on Poverty is a national, ecumenical Christian social justice charity, committed to tackling poverty in the UK. We work in partnership with churches, and with people in poverty themselves, to tackle the root causes of poverty.’

[The Jubilee+ Refugee Network](#) (formerly R2C2, the Refugee Resource Centre for Churches)

‘The Jubilee+ Refugee Network was set up partly at the request of Christian groups working with refugees in Britain today, who pointed out a gap in bringing together all of the expertise and experience of those across the country involved in this vital work.’

[Jubilee+](#)

‘Our vision is to see the Church in the UK be a champion of the poor and a means to healthy communities across the nation.’



Thank you for reading.

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