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**GOING
THE DISTANCE
25 YEARS OF URBAN PRESENCE**

Paul Keeble

URBAN TRACTS



Going the Distance: A Reflection on 25 Years of Urban Presence

Paul Keeble

Urban Tracts, Book 2

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Cover image by Paul Keeble

Author

Paul Keeble and his wife Judith have lived in a Manchester inner-city neighbourhood since 1980, raising a family and as part of a local church. After some years travelling as a bass-player in several bands he decided to concentrate on resourcing mission and ministry where he lived, and in 1996 co-founded [Urban Presence](#) with Derek Purnell to support this work. He has been involved in several local organisations, ministries, churches, and charities and a few nationally, including [Street Pastors](#) and [Movement for Justice and Reconciliation](#). In 2002 he helped set up community organisation 'Carisma', a grass-roots response to a gang violence issue in Manchester. In 2013 he completed an MPhil degree, 'Mission-With', researching aspects of mission in the urban context. A Mission-With [book](#) was published in 2017.

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: why an ‘urban presence’?

In this second of the Urban Tract series, like Greg Smith in the first, I write out of over 40 years’ experience of mission and ministry in inner-city Manchester—but concentrating on the last 25 with the charity Urban Presence. I set the scene by writing about the city, and then the imbalance behind the needs for resourcing and recognition that Urban Presence sought to address, and its causes. I then focus on that second need, in particular the relationship between inner-city churches and communities and churches in the outer suburban ring with their contrasting and, I argue, distanced, understanding of the urban context. This underlines the crucial importance of location, being incarnationally close to those we seek to love, serve, and reach in Jesus’ name, and long-term going the distance, as opposed to short-term episodic mission or ministry from a distance. I use a case study to illustrate the struggle of trying to communicate with and draw support from wider networks. Part of that struggle was dealing with inaccurate perceptions of the inner city and I conclude with two deliberations on the effects of distance. These contrast prayer from the outside and community presence and action on the inside and the acceptance of a particular framing of Manchester’s inner city as gang-ridden ‘Gunchester’ as examples of distanced perception distortions.

I once had a conversation with a pastor of a large suburban evangelical church who was struggling to keep all his musicians happy. They had four separate music groups which took turns leading worship songs on Sundays and some were getting frustrated at the lack of opportunities to ‘exercise their ministry’. At that time my much smaller inner-city church had four musicians. That week another inner-city church had contacted us asking for help as their musicians—a husband and wife—were not going to be available that Sunday. So, we were proposing to split our four into two pairs. With this in mind, I told this pastor that there were churches not far from his own

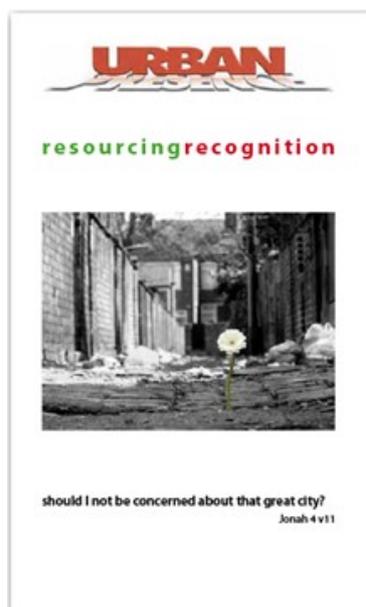


Figure 1: Urban Presence leaflet, 2011.

who were struggling to find musicians and that maybe a solution to his problem might be to partner with one or more of them and send some of his groups elsewhere on Sundays. His expression was one of incomprehension – perhaps that I would even ask this? And his reply words to the effect of: ‘No, I don’t think that would be possible.’

Urban Presence was a charity I co-founded in 1996 with fellow urban-activist Derek Purnell. The charity was wound up in 2021, partly because we’re getting older and partly because the charitable functions such as hot-housing new projects had long since ceased to be used. However, our urban presence continues. Derek was born and grew up in a Birmingham overspill estate and has lived in an inner-city estate in North Manchester since moving there in the late 70s. I am from Northern Ireland, grew up on a small, modern estate in the suburbs, but after coming to Manchester in 1978, felt a call to the inner city. My wife and I moved into a council flat in 1980, then on to a terraced house in the same area in 1983, where we still are as long-term ‘incomers’—though having spent well over half our lives here, we could now be closer to ‘native’.¹

¹ We have both written more on our roots and callings. See Derek Purnell, *Speaking the Un-speakable: Who Cares for the Working Classes?* (Manchester: Urban Presence, 2013); Paul Keeble, *Mission With: Something Out of the Ordinary* (Watford: Instant Apostle, 2017). Both available [here](#).



Figure 2: My street. Image by Paul Keeble.

Like the name implies, Urban Presence was all about the presence of Christians in urban areas: specifically deprived inner-city and outer estates. It was set up in response to what we saw, from our experience of living where we live, as two needs:

1. to resource Christians and churches living and working in these areas, and
2. to recognise these areas as mission-fields, not overseas, but on our doorsteps.

Those two needs, we believe, were created by an imbalance. If the most important resource of God's church in its task of sharing in the [Missio Dei](#) is its members and the witness of their daily lives in the world, then where those members 'live and move and have their being', as salt and light and yeast, is crucial to the effectiveness of that mission.

In the early days of Urban Presence, we noted from census data that approximately 75% of the population of Manchester lived in the inner city or outer estate areas, with 25% in the suburbs. From observational and anecdotal evidence, we made a rough estimation that, when it came to where Christians lived, the figure was reversed: 25% lived in the inner city and 75% lived in the suburban areas.

With a relatively small number of exceptions, it has been our experience and observation that the aspirations of people concerning desirable places to live (and by

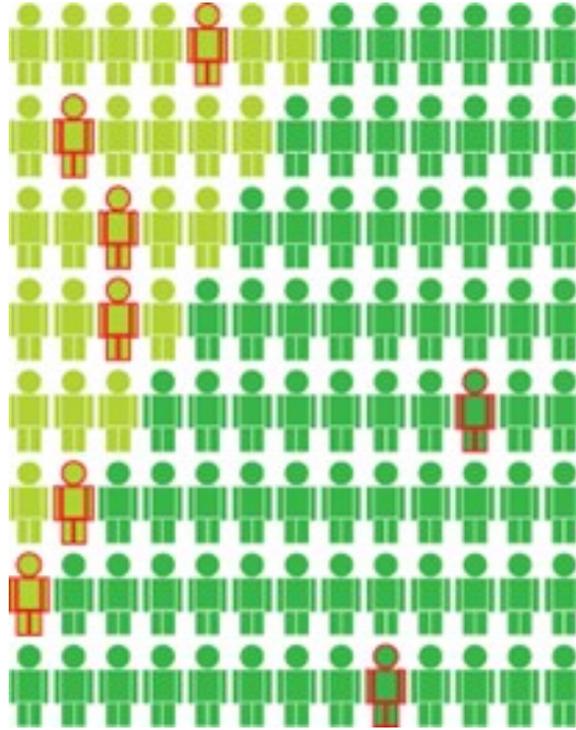


Figure 3: About 1 in 13 in the UK go to church, combined here with where people live: light green = suburbs and city-centres; green = inner-city and overspill estates. Image by Urban Presence.

extension the places they would leave if they could) are mirrored in the church. The resultant ‘drift to the suburbs’, as it has been called, leaves ever smaller and less able numbers in inner-city areas and churches.² Hence the need to resource, empower and encourage those still present in the inner city, and to see recognition within the wider church of the existence of under-resourced areas in our cities. The causes of this imbalance must be identified and addressed, both in our missiology—specifically our theology of place and presence—and in how we disciple our members.

Our point back in 1996 was—and still is—that if all Christians, to use a popular phrase, have been ‘placed’ by God where they are, then, given the proportion in the inner city, that imbalance would suggest God is not that concerned with reaching the people in the inner city. If we assume that is not the case, what is the extent of this imbalance and how do we explain it? Also, given their distance from it, physically

² And, let us not forget, in many rural areas, seaside towns, overspill estates, and other pockets of deprivation.

and culturally, how have the suburban churches related to the inner city, both as a context and to the churches and Christians located there? These issues will be explored further below.

Chapter 1

Context: 25 Years of Change... Or Not

As with many cities in the UK, the last 25 years have seen big changes in the make-up of the population of the central part of Manchester. Some things, however, remain largely unchanged.

1.1 Change 1

The growth of minority ethnic groups, with many new people arriving and mostly settling in the inner city have added to existing African, West Indian, and Southern and Eastern Asian communities. They have also, particularly in the case of a number of African and Eastern European countries, established new communities. This adds a multi-cultural and multi-faith dimension that is both enriching and a challenge to our hospitality. Inner areas where rents are cheapest have long had a transitory element to their population as successive waves of immigrants have settled. To take one example, in Moss Side this can be traced back to the Irish in the nineteenth century, through the '[Windrush Generation](#)' in the 1940s, through to Somalis in the 2000s. As different groups have got established in work and grow families, they often

move out to a ‘better’ part of the city,¹ leaving space for the next wave.²

In terms of religion, as well as a growth in mosques, gurdwaras, and other gathering places of faith groups, there are now many shared nationality and language church groups meeting in community centres and small industrial units—wherever accommodation can be found. Again, this is often in the inner city. Others meet in existing church buildings at various times other than Sunday mornings. These churches are mostly gathered, bringing in people with a shared culture from across the city, only some of whom may live locally. There is no more initial commitment to the area where the church meets than that, though some have worked hard to build good local relationships. That vital missional aspect of a witness that is present on a daily basis and in daily life is much reduced or absent, leaving, if anything, an occasional mission campaign or a leaflet outreach.

On our street we have had sincere Christians call at our door several times with a leaflet inviting us to hear a preacher at the nearby rooms they have rented. I always ask where they live and haven’t yet had an answer that was within easy walking distance. We also have people going door-to-door offering goods from dubious sources, and they tend to get a better reception! Cold calling is not an effective evangelistic tool, particularly in a multi-ethnic area. Figure 1.1 formed the front of a gospel tract naïvely given out round here by a well-meaning Nigerian Christian group who travel in and meet at a small industrial area nearby.

¹ For instance, many West Indian people have moved from Moss Side to neighbouring areas such as Old Trafford and Chorlton, but still travel back to their churches on Sundays.

² This is in line with the ideas of the [Chicago School](#) on urban ecology and waves of settlement.



Figure 1.1: Front of tract distributed in a multi-ethnic area in 2019. Image by GoodSalt, used under license. For more on the origins of this portrayal of Jesus as white (and its use by non-white churches) see [here](#) or [here](#).

1.2 Change 2

The second change has been the huge growth of city-centre dwelling. In 1987 around 300 people lived in the centre; by 2020 this had grown to some 72,000, and that figure has been forecast to increase to 100,000 by 2024.³ This is a very different type of ‘urban’ in that it is pre-dominantly young, upwardly mobile professionals who choose to move into this part of the city, close to their jobs, as old warehouses, factories, and other brown-field sites are converted or demolished to create apartments.

These regenerated city-centre developments are often right next to poorer inner-city areas, and there is [evidence](#) of their growth bulging into those areas and displacing the people there to over-spills at the edges of the city. That these thousands of

³ Our Manchester, *State of the City Report 2020* (Manchester: Manchester City Council, 2021), p. 35.



Figure 1.2: Ancoats, New Islington, Manchester. Image by Paul Keeble.

homes are being built while there are 100,000 households in Greater Manchester on the waiting list for affordable or social housing is another whole issue, which is beyond the scope of this tract.⁴

While we acknowledge that there is a need to reach these people with the gospel—and in recent years a number of church plants and fresh expression-type initiatives have begun to address this—our concern has always primarily been with those among whom we live in the ring of inner estates between the city-centre and the suburbs: the places which are consistently and stubbornly in the bottom 10% of deprivation statistics and where those who can move out, invariably do just that.

⁴ ‘Manchester is currently experiencing a housing crisis characterised by a shortage of affordable and social housing; there were 98,898 Greater Manchester households on the housing waiting list in 2019 (an increase of 98% since 1997). In this context, there are growing concerns amongst researchers, journalists and civil society groups that public land has been allocated to private developers to build unaffordable apartments.’ Tom Gillespie and Jonathan Silver, *Who Owns the City? The privatisation of public land in Manchester* (Greater Manchester Housing Action: Manchester, 2021), p. 4. This [report](#) is a good starting point for exploring these issues. See also [here](#).

1.3 Unchanged: The Poverty Belt

The Manchester ‘poverty belt’, as one historian has put it, dates back to the rapid industrial expansion of Victorian times, and is where deprivation is ‘more widespread than in any other UK city and many neighbourhoods display levels of social and economic deprivation substantially above the national averages’.⁵ Conditions were famously described by Fredrich Engels in 1845, who wrote of ‘working-people’s quarters, stretching like a girdle, averaging a mile and a half in breadth, around the commercial district’.⁶ While standards may have improved since then, as one modern commentator notes, the degree of inequality has not:

[T]he correlation between the worst housing, the greatest poverty and the shortest life expectancy is painfully evident from the statistics. The thresholds may have been raised, but the pattern is one that would have been familiar to [...] Friedrich Engels, almost two centuries ago.⁷

Statistics include the government’s Indices of Multiple Deprivation, measuring relative levels of deprivation in themes such as health, employment, crime, and education, zooming right in to population groups of 1000. The persistence of high levels of inequality is shown in the [2019 IMD](#) statistics, which reveal, for example, that twice as many people have serious health issues in inner-city Harpurhey than suburban Didsbury.⁸ The difference in life expectancy between these two areas is 15 years. In 1851 it was 14 years.⁹

⁵ Alan Kidd, *Manchester*, 4th Edition (Lancaster: Carnegie, 2006), p. 247.

⁶ Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 86. Engels was a German socialist philosopher whose classic work was based on observations from several years living in Manchester. For a modern take see Ken Loach’s 2016 film *I, Daniel Blake*.

⁷ Stuart Hylton, *A History of Manchester* (Chichester: Phillimore, 2003) p. 232. Also: ‘[How has life changed for Manchester’s poorest children in 200 years?](#)’ Guardian, 5 May 2021.

⁸ Clare Bamba, *Health Divides: where you live can kill you* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2016), p. 91.

⁹ Warren Heppolette, Executive Strategic Lead for GM Health and Social Care Partnership, Presentation at Manchester City Centre Movement Day, 10/10/19.

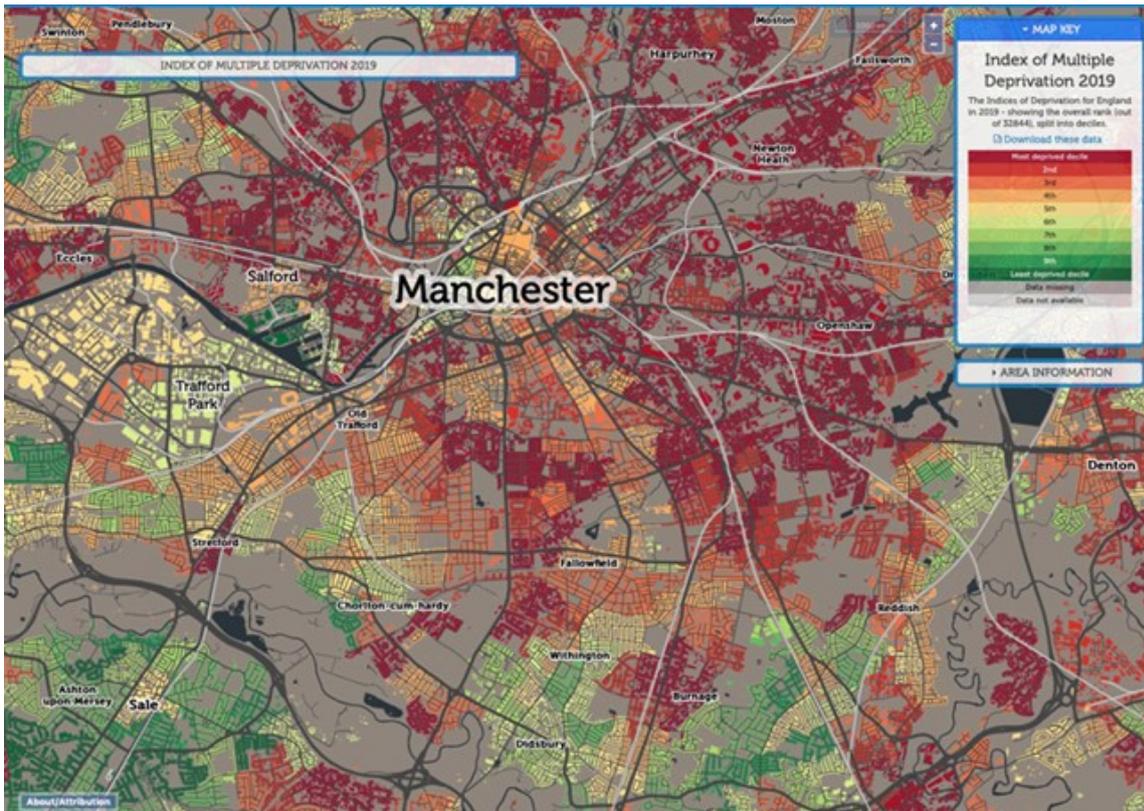
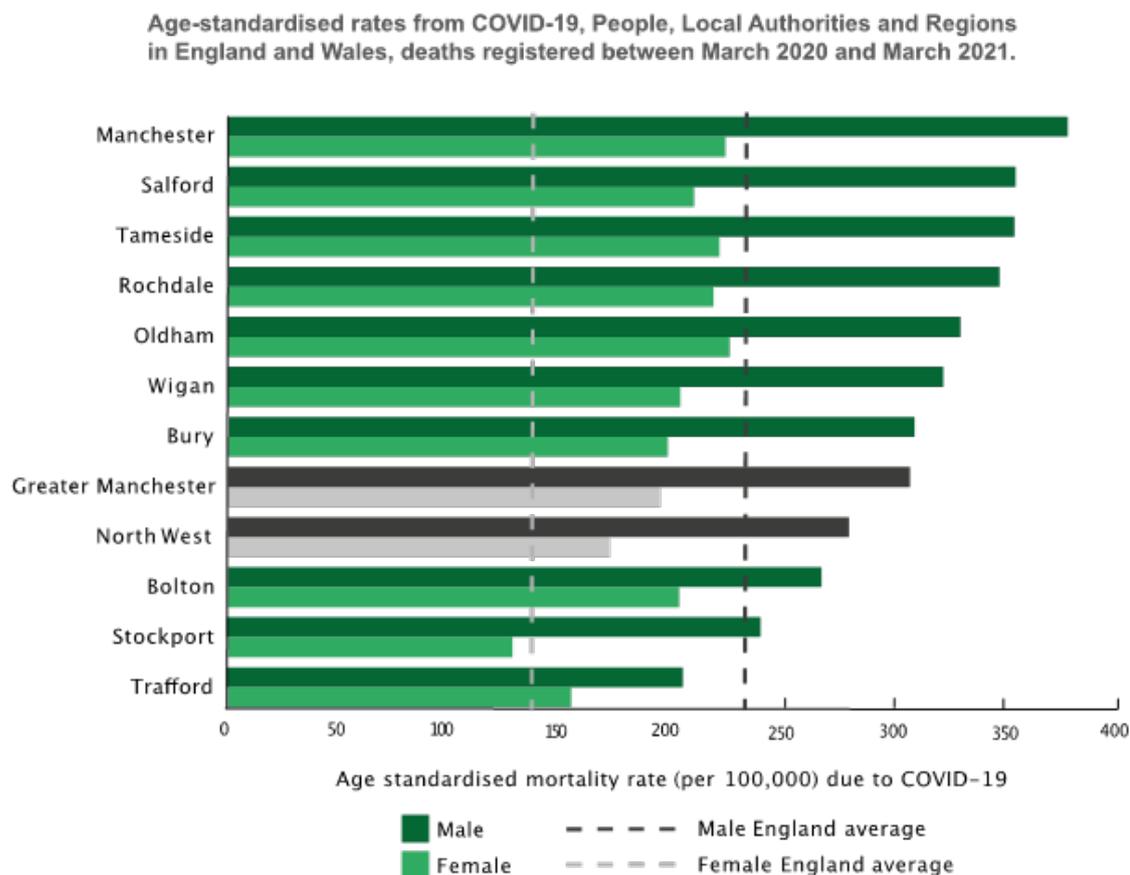


Figure 1.3: Greater Manchester Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2019. Image from [CDRC maps](#).

The pattern has been shown again more recently as the COVID pandemic has further exposed [inequalities](#).¹⁰ The [Marmot Report](#) revealed a 25% higher coronavirus death rate in Greater Manchester than the England average during the year to March 2021, together with widening social and health inequalities and a ‘[jaw-dropping](#)’ decline in life-expectancy.

¹⁰ England’s Chief Medical Officer, Professor Chris Whitty, has [commented](#) on the repeated impact on areas of deprivation: ‘Indeed in many of them, if you had a map of Covid’s biggest effects now and a map of child deaths in 1850, they look remarkably similar. These are areas where deprivation has been prolonged and deeply entrenched. Often these are not the areas with the largest number of doctors, nurses and others, and we really need to concentrate on these efforts very seriously.’ 17 June 2021. The need to ‘level up’ is not new.



Note: Deaths 'due to COVID-19' only include deaths where COVID-19 was the underlying (main) cause. Source: ONS.

Figure 1.4: Mortality rates from COVID-19 by region. Contains OS data © Crown copyright and database right 2021.

1.4 Responsibility

These are the areas we as individuals felt called by God to live in long-term, and where the Christians and churches that Urban Presence sought to serve and resource are based.

The context is challenging—more social need, more crime, more physical and mental health problems, and fewer resources—and at the wrong end of the division and inequality in our nation; Brexit, George Floyd and COVID having exposed and exacerbated what was already there.

The shrinking working class feels alienated and commodified; the growing 'left behind' or underclass are largely disengaged and suspicious; the ethnic minorities feel threatened and insecure, if anything more so by the increasingly blatant '[Hostile En-](#)

vironment'. There is a basic need for reassurance and wellbeing: a need for shalom and awareness of the love of God.

Sharing this is the responsibility of the whole church. Back in 1974, the Lausanne Covenant [stated](#): 'evangelisation requires the whole church to take the whole gospel to the whole world'. This includes the whole city. Is the Church reflecting wider society in failing to take adequate responsibility for the 'least, the last, and the lost'? Are its members reflecting that division and inequality in their lifestyle and location choices? This is the imbalance Urban Presence asked the church to recognise and address.



Figure 1.5: Images by Paul Keeble and Derek Purnell.

Chapter 2

The Imbalance

2.1 The problem: ‘the drift to the suburbs’

What church growth experts call ‘[Redemption and Lift](#)’, has long led to unquestioned ‘Redemption and Leave’ meaning a constant movement of Christians from the inner city to the suburbs.¹ The ‘lift’ can be seen positively as the acquisition of new values and changes in lifestyle as the new Christian grows in faith. But when the middle-class culture prevalent in most churches, with its ambition to improve economically and socially, is ‘alloyed with Christian discipleship, the result is a movement away from certain locations and communities and towards others, mirroring that of the wider aspirational culture.’² This mostly seamless move from ‘lift’ to ‘leave’ results in a reduced ‘local footprint’ for a church and a shift from a local or incarnational model to a ‘gathered’ model, as in many cases members who move away will travel back in on Sundays, sometimes just initially, sometimes long-term.

The fact that this ‘lift’ usually does lead to ‘leave’ calls into question the nature of the values being taught to new Christians, and which parts of the prevailing culture are questioned and which assumed.³

¹ An important refinement originated by Derek. See Derek Purnell, ‘Urban Presence,’ in John Vincent, ed., *Faithfulness in the City* (Hawarden: Monad, 2003), p. 69.

² Keeble, *Mission With*, p. 191. From a longer reflection on this issue.

³ Keeble, *Mission With*, p. 194.

Given God’s concern for the people of the inner city, and the responsibility of the whole church to reach the whole city, it would appear that many Christians are not hearing the call of God to move in. In addition, it is the case that many of those already in the inner city often move out. Our research and experience over many years leads us to this conclusion.

2.2 The causes: misplaced theology of place and flawed discipleship

The UK Church is mostly white and middle-class, dominated by [middle-class culture](#) and [leadership](#)—and its discipleship of believers has been compromised by white, middle-class values.

Where Christians live is largely missing from our discipleship. Our theology, and therefore our teaching, of calling is weak, meaning that in practice consideration of the biggest life choices such as location and career is effectively omitted, making a mockery of phrases such as ‘[Whole Life Discipleship](#)’. This is a church-wide problem, but it includes many inner-city churches. As one leader put it: ‘We encourage local involvement, but we don’t ever preach about where you live. [...] We wouldn’t give any direction in that area.’⁴ And as Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and Enuma Okoro write:

There is something to be said for a ‘theology of place’—choosing to orient our lives around community for the sake of the gospel. So much of our culture is built around moving away from people rather than closer to them. [...] Commitment to a people and place is one of the countercultural values at the heart of the gospel. It means recapturing the notion of the parish, a word which shares a root with parochial, meaning ‘localised and particular’.⁵

⁴ From a survey of 24 local inner-city churches that I undertook for my MPhil in 2013. Other answers from leaders included: ‘people are moving up the social ladder, buying houses’; ‘they started here and they just sort of moved out’; ‘those with get up and go, get up and do just that’.

⁵ Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, Enuma Okoro, *Common Prayer for Ordinary Radicals* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), p. 342. Reflection for July 1. See also ‘[Staying](#)

If choice of location and career is left up to the individual, and that choice is down solely to factors of economics and convenience, a job offer or a 'For Sale' sign in a desirable area can be seen as the leading and blessing of God, no further questions asked, by that individual or their leader.⁶ Is this ignorance of other facets of the calling of God making that calling subject to and governed by human ambition and aspiration?

Discipleship teaching which excludes the 'where' of Christian service, so the convert is unaware of that concept in their decision-making, helps explain the flow away from the inner city and other deprived areas.

Put' by Sally Mann.

⁶ In *Mission With*, I define the 'Question Not Being Asked' as: What is the modern equivalent of 'they left their nets (i.e., locations, vocations, relationships) and followed him'? p. 110.

Chapter 3

To Resource

Our resourcing at Urban Presence took several forms. We came alongside [urban ministry practitioners](#), churches and organisations to encourage, train, connect, and resource in practical ways. We also engaged in research, taught academic courses, ran training courses, wrote articles and books, and lobbied on urban concerns.

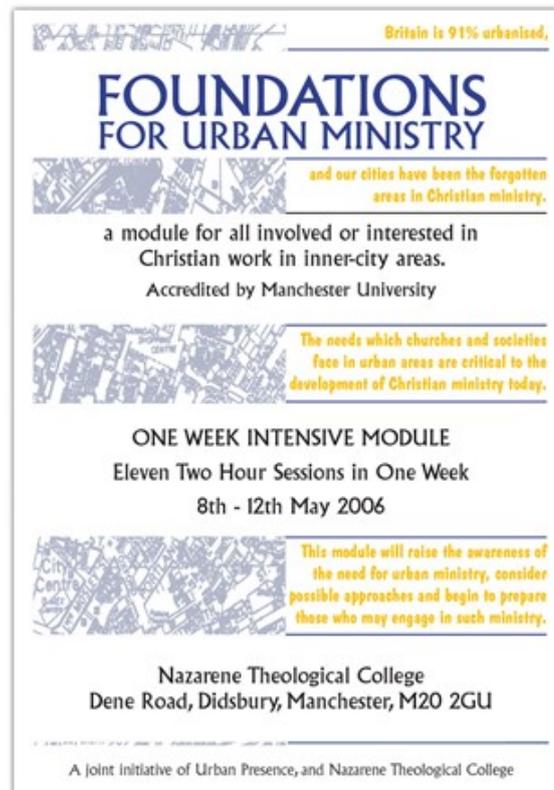


Figure 3.1: Leaflet for course at Nazarene Theological College. Image by Urban Presence.

We helped set up and run Community Organising projects and community organisations such as [Carisma](#) with its ‘PeaceWeek’ as a response to gang and gun crime. [Street Pastors](#) began as another response to that same issue and we were instrumental in that starting in [Manchester](#).



Figure 3.2: Logos from various community initiatives.



Figure 3.3: PeaceWeek family lantern parade. Image by Constantine Tofalos (used with permission).

We advocated for our communities with local councillors, MPs, media, funders, organisations, and businesses big and small. We ran a series of events for urban practitioners (though others were welcome) called ‘Reform’ with the simple aim of providing some refreshing support—a bit of sabbath, with refreshments. Our prayer for Reform was that those who came would feel better about serving God in the inner city when they left, than when they arrived. As a rule, it seemed that individuals and people from the smaller ministries found Reform helpful; bigger, more



Figure 3.4: Street Pastors in Manchester City Centre. Image by [Hannah Beatrice](#) (used with permission).

self-sufficient organisations with roots in the suburbs tended to stay away unless we had a famous guest speaker. This was all from a basis of living incarnationally as long-term residents and neighbours in inner-city communities and being members of local churches.

Despite the difficulties of this context, it should be a cause of celebration that a lot was achieved and there is much to be positive about: the privilege of serving God and the many amazing people we got to know, learned from, shared with, worked alongside on shared issues of concern, saw grow in their confidence and wellbeing, and sometimes develop in their Christian faith. And, not to forget, the multi-cultural cuisine was excellent too!

Over the years we have met up with, and worked alongside, [many others](#) with a similar calling to their inner cities, who understand the nature of that calling, its joys, sorrows and pressures and have been sources of support, encouragement, and learning. Others, too, outside of the inner city have sought to recognise and support our calling—indeed their resourcing has played a big part in enabling us to live here and give our time to mission and ministry.



Figure 3.5: Tony Campolo at Refurb, May 2004. Our biggest attendance! Image by Paul Keeble.



Figure 3.6: A Romanian meal, and a 2021 Iftar meal from one of our Somalian neighbours. Images by Paul Keeble.

Chapter 4

To Recognise

An indirect aspect of our resourcing was our work as advocates within the wider church for recognition of the inner city ‘mission field on our doorsteps’, created by the imbalance of where God’s people were located.

A key verse for us was 2 Corinthians 8:14: ‘At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality.’ Paul is talking about financial resources, but the goal of equality applies in other ways too.

This was work which we often found difficult and frustrating. That may partly be because we are difficult people to deal with, not content with a polite brush-off. (Derek has a theory that to survive in the inner city requires a degree of bloody mindedness!) When we got beyond politeness in meetings, phrases like ‘robust feedback’, ‘throwing red paint’, and ‘chaining yourselves to the railings’ are three I can remember being used of us. We sometimes employed a ‘good cop, bad cop’ methodology—and those who know us better can work out which was which—though we were known to swap. I would sometimes introduce myself in meetings as Derek’s Probation Officer and this was not entirely in jest!

However, whatever our personal imperfections and frustrations may or may not have been, often when we sought to engage with the wider church we encountered a lack of understanding about the nature of the inner city and a nervousness in engaging with people from churches there. This could show itself in well-meaning but inappropriately patronising attitudes and assumptions (maybe carry-overs into things spiritual from secular attitudes?). We also met with a reluctance to hear and engage with the call to serve in the inner city, and with the assumptions that would be exposed and

challenged by doing so. The overall feeling was one of being politely kept at arm's length.

Perhaps an indicator of how low the inner city has been in denominational priorities lies in the fact that little, if any, proper statistical research into church membership trends there has been done in the last 25 years.¹



Figure 4.1: Manchester city centre. Image by Derek Purnell.

4.1 Not just us

Of course we have not been the only ones engaged in urban mission and we have been encouraged by some positives we have seen within the wider church in the last 25 years, including a number of initiatives to encourage fresh, long-term, incarnational mission and ministry in the inner city: [Eden Network](#), [Urban Expression](#), [Urban](#)

¹ Peter Brierley, director of Christian Research, confirmed to Derek that there was nothing comprehensive or national available when he queried the absence of any comment regarding the urban context in publications relating to a UK Church Census. Purnell, *Speaking the Unspeakable*, p. 23.

[Life](#), [Antioch Network](#), and [InnerChange](#) to name just a few.² Some ground has been re-claimed. Lives have been changed by the power of the Gospel, though rarely to the extent of lasting change in a community, as these new inner-city disciples have often subsequently moved away.

Some projects and initiatives arrived with a fanfare only to fizzle out again, and, on several occasions, we found ourselves counselling disillusioned workers. One said she had pictured herself ‘like Mary Poppins singing gospel songs on her guitar with the local children at her feet’. She had moved into an estate fired up with faith-filled expectations, fed by a high-energy sending church or agency, distanced from the context and with a theology contaminated by success models from the business world, only to find that instead of revival there had been broken windows and slashed tyres.

Other projects which have sought to learn lessons, consult, and take a more measured approach have lasted and grown. But compared to the scale of the issue and the size of the imbalance, they have caused little more than a series of brief blips within the wider church culture (though maybe that wasn’t the aim). While the basic imbalance that we initially responded to remains, and its underlying causes stay largely unrecognised and therefore unquestioned and unchallenged, this pattern can only continue.

One of the triggers of a recent, significant surge of church-planting, fresh expressions, and creation of resource churches was Bishop Philip North’s [memorable address](#) (p. 20) to the General Synod of the Church of England in 2013 about the two and a half years it took to fill a vacancy in his former parish on a large Hartlepool estate. ‘Compare that with a recent vacancy in a richly endowed parish near Paddington, which attracted 123 firm applicants, and you will see the true measure of the spiritual health of the Church of England’. This led to [media coverage](#), a number of [conference talks](#), and an Archbishop’s [Evangelism Task Group](#).³

The Hartlepool by-election result of May 2021 was seen in part as a kickback by local people against years of [deprivation](#), driven by a feeling of being [abandoned](#) by their long-time political advocates. Had the church done the same? In how many

² There is also the [National Estate Churches Network](#) which supports people already active in Christian ministry on social housing estates.

³ Its report is [here](#). The [Estates Evangelism Task Group](#) is a current legacy of this.

other deprived areas is this also the case? If the dough isn't leavened, does the fault lie with the dough or the absence of yeast? (Luke 13:20-21) There is much ground to be made up. And this is not just a criticism of the Anglicans. A 2011 study of Methodist ministers showed 6% living in the bottom fifth of most deprived postcodes.⁴

⁴ Michael Hirst, 'Location, Location, Location', *Methodist Recorder*, 10th May 2012, p. 8.

Chapter 5

The suburban or wider Church and the inner city

In the same year that Urban Presence began a young [David Beckham](#) announced himself to the football world with an audacious goal from a shot taken inside his own half. To us in the inner city much of wider church concern, prayer or outreach seems similar: long-range shots from the safety of your own half. Just occasionally, one might go into the goal.



Figure 5.1: Shooting from a distance. Image by [Vecteezy](#).

In reflecting on our efforts to advocate for the inner city and engage with individuals, leaders, churches, organisations, and initiatives from the wider church, one word recurs: distance. A recurrent feeling was of being kept at a safe distance. We garnered many warm words, earnest prayers, and compliments on how ‘heroic’ we and others like us were. Though sincere, we found this praise slightly irritating as all we were doing was trying to be obedient to a calling. We believe that calling to

inner-city ministry has a lot to do with the incarnational model of Jesus who ‘[moved into the neighbourhood](#)’, removing that distance. This is what Urban Presence was about.

Before looking at our experiences of relating to the wider church, I want to reflect on two aspects of that distance.

5.1 Physical distance: Mission

We often encountered a reluctance to close the distance and engage in the inner city. I was once invited to speak about ‘PeaceWeek’ to a group of mostly suburban evangelical leaders at a Greater Manchester planning meeting for a year-long [national campaign](#) of evangelism and social action. ‘PeaceWeek’ was an annual festival of events and activities, including a 4-week [local radio station](#), owned and run by local people in an area blighted by gun and gang crime. It was about working together on an issue of shared concern: the welfare of our young people. Such grass-roots initiative is a rarity in inner-city areas and should be valued and encouraged. As a part of community organisation ‘Carisma’, I was one of the organisers. My hope was that ‘PeaceWeek’ could be a part of the social action aspect of the campaign, with churches across the city partnering to show solidarity, and putting on their own peace-themed events. I presented it as an opportunity to work in a different way: rather than doing something for the local community, it was about coming alongside and working with them. This item was well down a long agenda, and several chose this point to leave the meeting. I was listened to politely by the rest, but no-one responded.

Other factors may have been in play, such as: who was in control, the involvement of people of other faiths, and this sort of activity not being ranked too highly in terms of ‘gospel content’. If your theology of mission has verbal sharing or preaching of the gospel message as the most important aspect, without which an activity or project is seen as a wasted opportunity, then there will be an obligation to ensure that happens.

This is not to suggest that no mission from the wider church takes place in the inner city. It does, but it normally takes the form of a short, high-intensity campaign, with an emphasis on evangelism, and only including ‘social action’ as a smaller component. This is usually carried out by young volunteers, recruited from a wide



Figure 5.2: Two of our young PeaceFM DJs. Image by Paul Keeble.

area and formed into teams, who would visit deprived areas to pick up litter, paint fences, do gardening, provide sports for children, and other activities. While these are seen as being worthwhile tasks in themselves, there is an emphasis on getting into conversation with the local people in order to share the Gospel and invite them to the big evangelistic events in the evenings. These projects are expensive—in terms of both time and money—and those who pay that cost are clearly very committed to the sharing of the Gospel in ‘word and deed’. But mostly word.

There are several positives about this form of mission, not least in the effect on the young people in the teams, which in the past has included two of my own children. Efforts are made to connect with local churches and where this activity can be sensitively used as a boost to pre- (and post-) existing social action and outreach, with the local churches very much calling the shots, it has the potential to be effective.

However, at its insensitive and non-consulting worst, when it comes to the inner city this is more of a visit than a ‘dwelling among’. Questions need to be asked about the lasting effects on the communities that have their litter picked up. How does having

people from mostly the middle-classes coming to do things for them make them feel about themselves? Does it subtly reinforce feelings of worthlessness and a culture where ‘they’ do things for ‘us’? What about the fresh litter that has appeared a few weeks after the mission has moved on? What about social justice and getting to the issues behind the symptoms?

As Desmond Tutu said: ‘We need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in.’ Even when done sensitively, if such mission results in new Christians with an inbuilt aspiration to assume the middle-class culture of their mentors rather than work out their faith in their own, then the inevitable ‘redemption and lift/leave’ will occur, the best-possible neighbour-witness to fellow-residents will be lost, and the left-behind community will be impacted by a further blow to their self-esteem.

Could that money and time be better spent in other, longer, harder, less glamorous activity with those communities?¹ Maybe, paying the salary of a much-loved, church-based worker in an established community hub on an inner-city estate that cannot get further funding because it isn’t a ‘new’ project?

5.2 Cultural distance: whose culture?

Derek describes taking an inner-city church elder to an event organised by some middle-class ‘New Church’ leaders, who asked as he looked around: ‘Is this their uniform?’, referring to the well-groomed smart-casual wear of those present.²

Our culture—a group’s shared beliefs and behaviours—and how it affects us is a whole other study. Lack of awareness of this has been [compared](#) to fish being unaware that they are swimming in water—we take for granted what has always been there.³

In this context, culture has already been discussed above: when I mentioned the issues resulting from the influence of middle-class culture on Christian discipleship.

¹ I have more to say on this in *Mission With*, pp. 216ff.

² Purnell, *Speaking the Unspeakable*, p. 1. ‘What troubled me as much as his evident discomfort was his apparent disappointment, possibly that there were no others like him.’

³ The notion of [White Supremacy](#) as an example of this lack of awareness in people racialised as white has been raised as part of the fall-out of the murder of [George Floyd](#) in May 2020.

Is there an unconscious assumption of superiority underlying this? This was the case with the original Victorian missionaries who, according to David Bosch, were: ‘unconscious of the fact that their theology was culturally conditioned; they simply assumed that it was supracultural and universally valid’.⁴ Writing about the urban context, Laurie Green warns that this is still a danger: ‘It is all too easy to enter into a deprived area or culture [...] expecting to introduce God into the place of mission and in fact introducing only an alien, gentrified culture’.⁵

Another factor is the narrowness of an evangelical Christian culture focused on the spiritual and moral transformation of the individual. A major consequence of this one-dimensional view of redemption in the West is the pass given to the influence of the values of our wider secular culture—a [bigger issue](#) than can be discussed in depth here. But, relevant to inner-city mission, is the lack of awareness or concern about how various policies and legislation actually affect people in terms of housing, social provision, education, or law and order. There is often ‘social action’ with little ‘social justice’. Again, there is a focus on the discipleship of the individual believer without regard to their context and culture, or that of their middle-class teachers, leading to their probable separation from it.

I have written elsewhere on the need to seek to engage with another culture with care and as much awareness as possible of the assumptions and baggage we bring.⁶ This takes time, humility, respect, patience, and a willingness to listen and learn and build relationships; all of which is not easy to do as a visitor on a short mission campaign.

It [be]comes more natural for us to shout the gospel at people from a distance than to involve ourselves deeply in their lives, to think ourselves into their culture and their problems, and to feel with them in their pains.⁷

⁴ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1991), p. 448.

⁵ Laurie Green, ‘I Can’t Go There!’, in Andrew Davey, ed. *Crossover City* (London: Mowbray, 2010), p. 5.

⁶ Keeble, *Mission With*, pp. 105ff.

⁷ John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (London: Falcon, 1975), p. 25.

5.3 Visiting: Coming to us

Over the course of our meetings over the years, formal and informal, with Christian organisations and other churches and leaders, we would often invite them to visit us where we lived and worked, meet with members of our churches, walk the streets, observe, and listen (sensitively). These invitations were rarely taken up. Some promised to visit but didn't show. We can't be entirely critical if there was nervousness: I remember a Christian leader entering a meeting in an estate in Moss Side during the time when gang violence was in the headlines. He was clutching his briefcase to his chest and looking flustered. Even though it was daytime, his taxi driver had dropped him on the main road and pointed toward the venue. But at least he turned up. While he was President of the Evangelical Alliance Sir Fred Catherwood and his wife Elizabeth visited us several times to offer support. Maybe my memory is failing, but I struggle to think of others who did this who were not actually from urban contexts themselves. Which is why this is a short section. (As a side note, during its 13 years of community organisation 'Carisma' had more visits from MPs—including the [Prime Minister](#)—than church leaders.)

5.4 Visiting: Going to them

Over the years, both Derek and I spoke at a number of conferences on urban mission, such as several of the 'Jesus in the City' urban congresses. Occasionally, usually as a result of some challenging about the lack of urban mission content in wider conference programmes, one of us would receive an invitation to speak about urban mission at one of those conferences.⁸ These took on a pattern:

- We would be given a seminar or workshop, usually in an afternoon slot, as one of a number of choices. (On one occasion one of the other speakers on offer was Tony Campolo!)
- The session would usually go well, and we would find ourselves afterwards in

⁸ For example: Paul Keeble, *A Survey of Spring Harvest Programme Seminar Information, 1996-2000* (Manchester: Urban Presence, 2001). This showed that out of 425 seminar titles and descriptions, none were directly about urban mission, though 17 could possibly have had relevant content.

long and deep conversations with a few individuals who felt really touched by what we had said about the urban context, either as an initial stage of, or a confirmation of, an existing call to move into such an area.

- We would get positive feedback from the organisers but would not get asked back.

Over several years we worked at getting a higher profile for urban ministry within a number of national Christian organisations. The hope was that this area of national mission could be moved up the priorities of these organisations to a place more in keeping with the need it is addressing: at least two thirds of the population being ministered to by, at best, one third of the Church.

5.5 A Case Study

One organisation we had several meetings with was the [Evangelical Alliance](#) (EA), of which Urban Presence was for some years a member organisation. At a consultation event prior to the Cardiff EA Congress of 2001 we were part of a call for a significant focus on urban ministry, echoed by the whole meeting. This resulted in a token, single (though very good) seminar, and a very brief mainstage slot—a disappointment not only to us, but to others from urban situations who were present. At a Congress Question Time session some characteristically ‘robust’ feedback from Derek led to us being invited to a meeting in London in January 2002 to discuss what the EA could do regarding the urban agenda. This turned into a series of meetings, at which our basic question was: is the EA reactive or proactive? Does it just respond to needs and agendas set by its membership, or is it seeking to inform and lead its membership into new areas of concern such as urban mission?

The EA’s receptiveness and willingness to listen and consider our concerns is praiseworthy. We were aware that there were others with other agendas also putting pressure on them—it is just that we felt ours was the most important!

Beginning from this initial meeting, through the next few years a pattern emerged:

- After a cordial meeting where we felt we were being listened to and progress was being made, actions such as the writing of a memo or paper, or a commitment to look into a suggested course of action would not be completed.
- It would take several queries from our end to get another meeting arranged as

messages were not passed on or emails went unanswered. When a meeting was set up it would often end up being with different personnel, leading to a degree of having to start over.

- A number of communication issues such as: ‘I thought we left it that you would get back to us.’

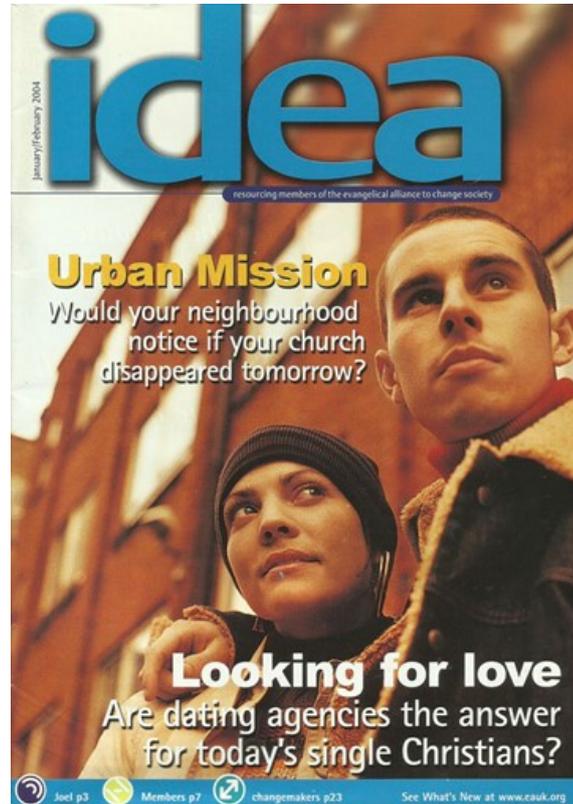


Figure 5.3: Idea Magazine Jan/Feb 2004. Image by the Evangelical Alliance (used with permission).

Not that nothing happened. As well as the personal support of Sir Fred Catherwood mentioned above, several articles on urban mission appeared in EA’s ‘Idea’ magazine, one of which included material from the Urban Presence website. While it was good to see these, they included some elements of what looked suspiciously like middle-class, suburban appeasement that reduced their impact—but maybe those were attempts at ‘balance’. Also, there was a lot of emphasis on social action in deprived urban areas which, whilst important, is by no means the only issue. Other issues, such as a lack of Christian presence, incarnational theology, redemption and lift, white flight in mixed ethnic areas, and middle-class cultural domination of the church, were largely absent. An EA promotional video at the time traded heavily on social needs which are in fact at their worst in Urban Priority Areas, places where a

minority of EA members live and worship. Was this honest?

Those articles and a few limited opportunities to speak at events and conferences were the only results of this time. Much time, effort, and cost in travel had gone in on our part and the trustees asked us for a report. In this, we summarised our experiences so far and finished with a reflection on a gracious reply from then EA director Joel Edwards to a critical email from me querying a statement in the otherwise excellent 'Uniting for Change' document: 'Most violent crime takes place in our cities, where a Christian presence is often strongest':

A specific point you make about the absence of Christians in inner-city urban centres with high crime rates is well taken. My point was rather more general. It was much more of a city-wide analysis which I was referring to, i.e., cities such as Manchester, London, Birmingham are all associated with strong Christian presence. Notwithstanding the point you make about the emptying out of the church's presence in some of the inner-city areas, this is indeed one of the key strategic issues which ministries such as yourself and others have been concerned with for many years. Somehow I think the two things need to be brought together.⁹

Ironically, this was exactly the principle we had been advocating, but by now we were tired and frustrated. The trustees, sensing this, felt we should pull back—as others had before us.¹⁰ The meetings duly fizzled out, and any further interaction in the following years was sporadic: occasional emails, informal conversations at a conference.

However, in 2014, with Philip North's appeal to the Church [still reverberating](#), we gave it another go with a meeting in London. Out of this, and some nudging from Greg Smith, came a request for Derek to feed in some questions for consideration at an EA Council day conference looking at 'Mission and social class in the UK today'.

⁹ Paul Keeble, Derek Purnell, *Urban Presence, the Evangelical Alliance, and the urban agenda. A report on three years of relating to the EA representing the case for wider support for, and understanding of, urban ministry*, Urban Presence internal document, July 2004, p. 6.

¹⁰ 'Others before us in urban work who have tried to encourage the wider church to care, only to give up in frustration and go back to concentrating on their ministry, have said to us "we hope you get somewhere, but we're not holding our breath". Several times in the last few months we have wondered if they were right.' *Urban Presence, the Evangelical Alliance, and the urban agenda*, p. 6.

That those questions had much in common with what we had been asking ten years previously says something in itself.

In these meetings, and in dealings with other organisations, such as Faithworks we were always dealt with courteously by the staff we encountered, even on a few occasions when we let our frustration get the better of us. But always there was that nagging feeling of being politely kept at a distance.

For the final part of this tract, I want to reflect further on two specific aspects of this notion of distance as it effects the response of the wider Church to the urban context.

Chapter 6

Distance Deliberation 1: Prayer

6.1 Praying for ‘the city’

Over the years, in Manchester and Greater Manchester there have been several prayer movements, intended to be multi-church and multi-tradition, and set up with the intention of increasing the quantity (and hopefully quality) of prayer for ‘the city’. This rather nebulous catch-all term could include businesses, commercial institutions and organisations, and local government as well as the people and the churches. Two examples would be ‘Prayer Network’—large, quarterly prayer meetings based out of ‘Network’, a Greater Manchester alliance of churches, individual Christians, and organisations, run as a local arm of the national Evangelical Alliance—and ‘Prayer Walls’—a 24/7 chain of prayer staffed by individuals on a rota.



Figure 6.1: Prayer Network logo. Notice the ‘strong tower’.

I was one of the organising team for Prayer Network, which ran from 1993 to 2003. Urban Presence was launched as a charity by EA President Sir Fred Catherwood at a Prayer Network event in 1996. Prayer Network brought Christians together from across Greater Manchester to pray around particular themes, which included

politics, healthcare, the police, church unity, social action, those in authority, and on one occasion, working with Urban Presence, the inner city.¹

To its credit, Prayer Network worked hard at inclusivity, moving the location to venues—usually churches—around the city. But the drop-off in attendance was noticeable when it was not in the suburban south, more so when the location was in the inner city (even when a ‘car patrol’ was organised!).

The underlying theological motif for Prayer Network was that of surrounding the city with ‘strong towers’ of prayer. This had a geographical aspect in that these were seen as being the large churches in the ring of suburbs around the city. Though well-meant, inner-city churches did not appreciate the arguably unbiblical connotation of strength and weakness, and there was a sense of prayers being lofted in from a distance, Beckham-style. A case in point is described below.



Figure 6.2: The first Prayer Network of the new millennium in Manchester Town Hall. Image by Paul Keeble.

¹ A simple show of hands that evening in answer to the question who actually lives in the sorts of areas we are praying for tonight made our 75/25 estimate look generous.

6.2 The Prayer Meeting

A spin-off from Prayer Network was ‘The Engine Room’, nightly prayer meetings during a period of city-wide mission. These took place in a nearby church simultaneously to the main outreach events in the Manchester Arena.

At one of these all those present were asked to gather in a circle to pray for the inner-city areas that were being visited during the day by teams of young people equipped with litter-pickers, bin-bags, paintbrushes and heaps of energy and enthusiasm to serve the local communities in deeds of ‘social action’. Standing in this circle, symbolically around—but not in—these areas, a dark picture of deprivation and need was painted, and earnest prayers were prayed. As I stood there, as someone who lives in one these areas, I realised that, at best, I could only partially agree with that picture: there was so much that was good and positive about my community and the people, my neighbours, my friends, who lived there. And then there was the inequality that was the cause of much of the poverty and deprivation and does not get touched by picking up litter for people. Do I say something? Do I point out that God is already active in those deprived areas and longing for more people to hear a call to move in there. My nerve failed me. How could I undermine such fervency? We asked the Holy Spirit to go into places the Church had largely dis-placed from. We sent in angels, we prayed against and bound principalities and powers in the name of Jesus. All from a safe distance. Beyond making us feel good, did it make any difference at all in the real world lives of people in the inner city?



Figure 6.3: Prayer for the City, 2002. Image by Paul Keeble.

6.3 Prayer Walls

While Prayer Network was a corporate expression of prayer for the city, Prayer Walls was about individuals committing to an hour of prayer a week. These were organised into a rota with the aim of covering all 24 hours of the 7 days. Each person had the name and number of the person following and would call them at the end of their hour to pass on the prayer baton as it were. While open to members of any church, with its vision of building walls of prayer around the city (perhaps between the strong towers), this was predominantly promoted among and populated by the larger suburban churches.

6.4 The Answer to Prayer

During the late 1990s up to the early 2010s there was a serious issue with gang crime where I live in inner south Manchester. I was part of a local grass-roots response to this, as part of Urban Presence, but more as a local resident working alongside neighbours of various faiths and none who shared a concern for the welfare of our young people. We set up a community organisation in 2003 called Carisma.²

At the end of January 2009 Greater Manchester Police released statistics on the number of gang-related firearms discharges between Valentine's Day (February 14) 2008 and the end of the year. The figure had fallen to just 3 from 38 in 2007—a 92% drop—and for the first year in a decade there had been no fatalities. This was seen as the successful outcome of 'Operation Cougar', an aggressive police operation which targeted known gang members, disrupting their activities, and making novel use of health and safety legislation to pick up young people in vulnerable situations or locations and remove them to a 'place of safety'. The [media](#) credited the work of community organisations such as Carisma as a crucial ingredient of the success of the operation, and Chief Constable Peter Fahy [said](#): 'Manchester has shed its "Gunchester" image thanks to the police and community efforts to tackle gangs.'

A Manchester Evening News headline about the statistics, '[Is this the End of Gunch-](#)

² I have written elsewhere about this. See Keeble, *Mission With*, pp. 131ff; Paul Keeble, 'Gang Violence', in Michael Eastman and Steve Latham, eds., *Urban Church: A Practitioner's Resource Book* (London: SPCK, 2004) pp. 103ff.

ester?’ was picked up by the organisers of a large national prayer meeting which had been held in Manchester the previous June where: ‘During a time of prayer it was declared that Manchester would no longer be known as Gunchester!’³

The claim of the statistics being an answer to prayer is interesting. I knew some of the organisers of this event personally and they would not claim this deliberately, but the implication could be taken that the solution to the gang issue is simply to get 1000 Christians together in a hall to pray about it—most of whom would have never set foot in the places where the gang violence had been happening! If some of my co-workers in Carisma—who were mostly not Christians—had been present I think they would have resented that implication, and their years of hard work on the ground not even being mentioned.



Figure 6.4: Carisma PeaceWeek 2011 OSBAs (Outstanding Social Behaviour Awards). Image by G. Oboh (used with permission).

I have no problem with the necessity of prayer and taking action in the spiritual realm—it is one of the distinctives of the Christian approach. But without comple-

³ Email from City Links, January 30, 2009.

mentary action in the earthly realm its effectiveness there will be limited. Walter Wink underlines the necessity of prayer, while emphasising the link with the day-to-day: 'Prayer is never a private inner act disconnected from day-to-day realities. It is, rather, the interior battlefield where the decisive victory is won before any engagement in the outer world is even possible.'⁴ He further reminds us that either extreme is to be avoided: 'Social action without prayer is soulless, but prayer without action lacks integrity.'⁵

Though it was a national event, most of those attending (including myself) would have been local Christians from the Manchester area. Most of these would have been from the suburban areas of the city and, while it is encouraging that so many have a concern, being willing to pray from a distance should not be considered as a complete solution to an issue which also requires up close involvement through preparedness to be present and contribute practically within the context. Building relationships and trust require incarnational ministry and working on advocacy and solidarity means learning about and understanding the context and bigger picture. A lot more time and effort than giving up a summer evening to pray.

⁴ Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Bantam, 1998), p. 181.

⁵ Walter Wink, *Engaging The Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), p. 306.

Chapter 7

Distance Deliberation 2: The Experts - framing the issue

As Benjamin Disraeli is reported to have said: ‘There are lies, damned lies and statistics.’ Facts and figures and accounts of incidents can vary according to point of view, emphasis, simple omission, bias, assumptions, political spin, vested interest, and all sorts of other variables and influences. As well as, of course, who has the loudest megaphone.¹

How does ‘distance’ feature in all of this potential confusion?

The statistics that were quoted and celebrated at the above prayer meeting were questioned by local people in terms of their accuracy and significance. The police themselves give reasons why firearms crime tends to be underreported, and then Chief Constable Peter Fahy commented on: ‘the difficulty of putting too much em-

¹ ‘[T]hey gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’”’ Matt 28:12-14. A spin of the resurrection story?

phasis on crime figures. There are many anomalies and pitfalls.’² This is supported anecdotally.

Shortly after the statistics were released a local youth worker told me of an incident nearby the previous night where five shots were fired, all of which—thankfully—missed. It was gang-related, but the police did not attend, probably because it was not reported. The youth worker asked if this incident would then be counted in the statistics for 2009, adding that, if so, it represented on its own ‘a 166% increase in shots in one month compared with the previous eleven!’³ She saw this incident as a reminder that the issues behind ‘Gunchester’ were ‘still continuing and threatening the most vulnerable, voiceless and powerless group in the area—young, black and white men primarily, but young women too.’⁴

This story points to a need for caution in assessing the significance of statistics. Manchester-based journalist Ally Fogg, writing in the [Guardian](#), summed up local feeling:

the solutions to gun and gang crime are not as simple as just catching the bad guys, even though that is an essential component. If the streets on which they grow continue to fertilise criminality and violence, then we are merely cutting off the nettles, not pulling up the roots.⁵

Whatever the caveats concerning the trustworthiness of statistics and what they might or might not indicate or conceal, the 92% drop in incidents that were recorded by the police indicated a reduction in reported activity, even if it was not the whole picture. The lack of fatalities spoke for itself and was to be celebrated.

² ‘Most forces in England, Wales and Northern Ireland perceive that the extent of criminal-on-criminal firearm offences means that a great deal of firearms crime will go unreported. This under-reporting is inevitable where victims who are engaged in criminal activities do not wish to draw attention to themselves, and non-criminal victims fear reprisals should they report incidents. Many forces and other sources state that under-reporting is of a sufficient level for statistics not to reflect the experience of many neighbourhoods.’ Gun Crime and Gangs: Response to the Home Secretary. Report produced by the Association of Chief Police Officers, September 2007. 2.2.8. p. 16.

³ Email from Helen Gatenby, manager, M13 Youth Project, February 4, 2009.

⁴ Email from Helen Gatenby.

⁵ This image is reminiscent of Jim Wallis’s exhortation about terrorism: ‘We must drain the swamp of injustice in which the mosquitoes [...] breed.’ Jim Wallis, *God’s Politics* (Oxford: Lion, 2005), p. 106.



Figure 7.1: Carisma also worked on other aspects of the gun and gang problem, Peace-Week 2006. Image from Manchester Evening News (used with permission).

However, the acceptance of official statistics by the Christian organisers of the prayer event (albeit well-meaning and sincere) could be indicative of a tendency by sections of the Church, particularly those more distanced from the context, to agree uncritically with what is spoken by the ‘experts’—in this case the police—and reproduced by the media, defined by Hall et al. as the ‘primary’ and ‘secondary definers’—the primary definition sets the limit for all subsequent discussion by framing what the problem is.⁶ And is not. This expert definition of the issue has consistently reduced the gang problem to criminal behaviour. This has then informed policy in how to deal with it, policy that has been condemned by social researchers and criminologists as simplistic, myopic, ineffective, and ‘a largely enforcement-led strategy on the basis of an at best partial understanding of the issues’;⁷ dealing with symptoms rather than seeking to understand causes.⁸

⁶ Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J., Roberts, B., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (Macmillan: London, 1978), p. 57.

⁷ Squires, P., Grimshaw, G., Solomon, E., *Gun crime: A review of evidence and policy* (London: Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, 2008), p. 45.

⁸ Echoed recently on Twitter in response to the Government’s ‘Beating Crime’ announcement. e.g., ‘Our focus should be on social justice before criminal justice. Until we tackle the drivers of crime—lack of care, abuse at home, falling into gang culture, underlying psychological and mental health issues—we will continue to fail to prevent it. It is time for a re-think!’ @SteveChalke 27/7/21. Again, not much changes.

Government law and order policy has long been criticised as being designed by and to suit the powerful and middle-classes voters, mired in short-term expedience of being seen to do something, and invariably suppressive, while preserving the (im)balance of power and wealth that is a major cause of this issue and many more. Squires et al. state that ‘the government’s criminal justice policy (and wider social policy) has been characterised by a reluctance to acknowledge the causal relation between income inequality and violent crime’.⁹ This missing ingredient in policy-making chimes with the assertion of Austin Smith, a priest in inner-city Liverpool, that it is not the poor who are the problem, but the rich:

An arbitrary and unequal structure of resources is not thought up by the poor of this world. It flows from the decisions of the rich, be they rich by status, position or privilege, or all three. I must not search for the definition of poverty within the so called cycles of poverty and deprivation, rather I must search within the cycle of affluence.¹⁰

Criminologist and ex-youth worker John Pitts, who extensively researched gang members in an area of London, suggested that the solution lies in restoring equality.¹¹ The emphasis needs to be ‘not transforming the individual but transforming the predicament of the individual.’¹²

So, for all the rhetoric about ‘empowering the poor’, much of it emanating from the Church, the solution lies with the rich and powerful becoming less so—simple arithmetic (and more recently ‘levelling up’). Giving power to the powerless cannot happen ‘without the powerful, whether they be powerful economically, socially or politically, having to face a total change in their own lives. One cannot have it both ways.’¹³

However, so far ‘the Church has found it more acceptable to speak up on behalf of the poor than to confront the mainstream culture which forms us so extensively.’¹⁴

⁹ Squires et al., *Gun crime*, p. 46.

¹⁰ Austin Smith, *Passion for the Inner City* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1983), p. 95.

¹¹ John Pitts, *Reluctant Gangsters: Youth Gangs in Waltham Forest* (University of Bedfordshire, 2007).

¹² John Pitts, address to the Street Pastors conference, London, November 2009.

¹³ Smith, *Passion for the Inner City*, p. 98.

¹⁴ Ann Morisy, *Journeying Out* (London: Morehouse, 2004), p. 96.

Bosch calls for a ‘different kind of conversion’ for the non-poor, ‘which would include admitting complicity in the oppression of the poor and a turning from the idols of money, racism and self-interest’—required because of their unethical actions and because they have ‘through their “psuedo-innocence” actually denied themselves access to knowledge.’¹⁵ Ann Morisy wonders if our diffidence about the ‘dishonesty and denial that infect suburban and affluent living’ is because ‘challenging “the mainstream” risks biting the hand that feeds us, and risks onlookers inspecting our lifestyle and wagging their heads as they find it no different than their own.’¹⁶ Morisy contrasts liberal, secular, social policy aimed at the transformation of the poor with what should be the radical, missionary activity of the Church aimed at ‘the transformation of the secure, the well-meaning and the well-endowed of this world.’¹⁷

While those guilty of serious gang-related crimes do need to be held accountable and ‘brought to justice’ (a whole other debate), the forms of justice they have not had need to be named as one of the ingredients of a volatile chemistry of which their behaviour is a symptom. There is of course a need for intervention and enforcement, but that must not be the sum of the response. And we also need to think beyond funding some ‘diversionary’ youth work, which seeks to rescue a few individuals while leaving the status quo unchallenged.

Could it be that in categorising the activity of the gangs as simply ‘criminal behaviour’—in much the same way as people responded to the Moss Side riots of 1981 and the [Tottenham riots](#) of 2011¹⁸—and concentrating on responses that are all about enforcement, or at best ‘diverting’ young people away from behaviour thus defined, we are missing the deeper reasons behind such behaviour and ‘merely cutting off the nettles, not pulling up the roots’? As Kerry points out in the case of the 1981 riots, simplistically labelling the behaviour as criminal conveniently means the system only

¹⁵ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 437.

¹⁶ Morisy, *Journeying Out*, p. 96.

¹⁷ Morisy, *Journeying Out*, p. 28. Morisy continues: ‘The processes that Jesus teaches and demonstrates invest potential in the most unlikely, not in the well-resourced.’

¹⁸ ‘At the time, the response from right-wing politicians and those who had nothing to do with the inner city areas gripped by rioting was to dismiss it all as sheer lawlessness.’ Local MP Dianne Abbott [reflects](#) ten years on from the Tottenham riots.

needs tightening up not changing.¹⁹

‘The privilege of distance’ is a phrase used by Trymaine Lee on a [podcast](#) about the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, noting the difference in experience (and trauma) between members of that community, particularly those who witnessed the atrocity, and that of the rest of us who observed from afar, and in some cases made ill-informed judgements about the intensity of the reaction it generated, as we had no conception of the depth of feeling behind it.

Martin Luther King said that rioting was ‘[the voice of the unheard](#)’. I once spoke with one of the protesters behind the [Holy Cross dispute](#) in the Ardoyne area of North Belfast. He said they felt driven to take extreme action to draw attention to their situation as a desperation tactic born out of feelings of frustration and betrayal by the authorities. Less than a year later he was burnt out of his home. As of [April](#) this year, it seems those feelings are back as a young man in Belfast [states](#): ‘Sometimes violence is the only tool you have left’. I am reminded of the gang member in Moss Side who said at [GangStop](#): ‘The only time anyone listens to me is when I point a gun at them.’

The following was written about elderly people in care, often marginalised and misunderstood by our society:

being violent may be their only way of asserting their rights and maintaining some degree of autonomy or letting us know about pain, both physical and emotional. If we as carers thought first “What is this person trying to tell me?” rather than responding in a defensive way to the aggression, then perhaps aggression would cease to be a “problem” behaviour.²⁰

Instead of simply accepting—or rejecting—official figures or interpretations, we need to come to them with a ‘[hermeneutic of suspicion](#)’. Ask questions about the statistics: who benefits, what possible injustice may be being perpetrated? Ask questions about the people: why certain behaviour has been portrayed as it has, what motivations lay

¹⁹ Kerry, S. E., *The Mass Media Coverage of the Moss Side Disturbances and Some Implications for Community Work* (MPhil Thesis, University of Manchester, 1985), p. 765.

²⁰ MacKinlay, E., *Spiritual growth and care in the fourth age of life* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006), pp. 176-177.



Figure 7.2: The Gangstop march in 2002 led to the formation of Carisma. Image by Paul Keeble.

behind it, what frustrations or other emotions are involved? Look for an empathetic angle, grounds for [compassion](#). At the very least we will be enabled to pray more deeply for people and situations.

Of course, if one or more of those concerned happen to be people we already know because they are our neighbours, that gives a head start. The son of one of our neighbours was reported to his school for fighting in public while in uniform and summarily excluded. He was a keen learner and doing well and was devastated. My wife went with his mum to see the head and plead his case: which was that he had been attacked by a group of young men who had decided he was on ‘their territory’ and he was trying to defend himself. His skin colour probably hadn’t helped: the ready criminalisation of young black men and the inflexibility of ‘zero tolerance’ policy had done the rest. The exclusion was lifted, and he has since earned two university degrees and worked as a mentor in schools and a children’s home.

Yes, there was the answer to prayer referred to above, but it cannot just be seen in terms of crime reduction, as defined from a distance from the areas and lives affected. We cannot declare the problem solved without addressing the root causes which can



Figure 7.3: Old lady or young lady? Street brawling or self-defence? Image in public domain.

be seen clearly by those living with them, but whose voices are mostly not heard by Government or Church. We need to go ‘upstream and find out why they’re falling in’, but we may not like what we discover.

Conclusion: The Challenge

The Great Commandment is the lens through which we should view all our Christian practice, including our outworking of the Great Commission. Love God, love your neighbour as yourself. All the law and the prophets depend on these. The Greek word for ‘neighbour’ simply means ‘near’—those physically close.

It is not that mission to people in inner-city areas by means of occasional visits from a physical and cultural distance is impossible: the Holy Spirit can certainly use just about anything we offer. But mission from up-close and personal, taking whatever time it takes to make relationships, earn trust, share ordinary life, listening and learning before speaking, being evangelised (small ‘e’) by our neighbours by hearing their stories without shoe-horning in our agenda—in short, being an ‘urban presence’, is surely closer to the incarnational example of Jesus who sends us as the Father sent him.

A re-discovery of location can also have benefits for any church as a more effective way to be a positive local witness than a gathered (dare I say ‘consumer’) model. ‘What would the Church look like if we chose to buy homes in the same streets and subdivisions, the same buildings and blocks, the same suburbs and sections? What would our love look like if it showed up dozens of times a week in small but profound ways [. . .]?’²¹ And not just for a couple of hours on a Sunday morning when we are on our best behaviour, which requires them to come to us.

What if they could also meet and interact with us through the rest of the week in the neighbourhood, on the street, in the shops, at the local school, or at the bus-stop?

²¹ Paul Sparks, Tim Soerens, Dwight J. Friesen, *The New Parish: How Neighbourhood Churches are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), p. 139.

What if we did not have to start lots of projects and programmes to connect with and help the deprived and marginalised, but find that we are helping them simply because they are our neighbours?



Figure 7.4: Some of our neighbours at a bring and share picnic. Image by Paul Keeble.

What if the Church was a demonstration of what it means to be human in the world, and in everyday life, but sparking with the grace and love of God, as a foretaste of the kingdom of shalom peace, justice, and equality? And what if this demonstration were everywhere, including, in balance and properly resourced, the inner city?

That is the dream. That is the [baton](#) we at Urban Presence want to pass on.

I can think of no better way to end than with this, from fellow urban pilgrim Greg Smith, typed with passion in a Facebook post:

What I'm thinking about is that the 40 years in the wilderness since about 1979 (important date in politics) has been for those of us in urban ministry an era of a church generally unresponsive to the working class, and a society that has got more harsh and oppressive. Yet the journey has been exciting, guided by pillars of fire and cloud (sometimes fog),



Figure 7.5: Image by Urban Presence.

with daily supplies of manna and quails. Often disobedient, sometimes miraculous, occasionally mountain top experiences. Maybe like Moses our generation will never enter the Promised Land though we can see it spread out before us. A city where all God's people of every tribe, class and nation will be accepted and welcomed [...] and transformed where there will be no more tears [...] and where the river of the water of life will flow through the streets nourishing trees whose leaves and fruit will be for the SHALOM of the peoples and the universe.²²

Amen!

²² Greg Smith, 5/3/2019.



Thank you for reading.

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