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# JUST LEARNING WITH THE URBAN CHURCH

*Jenny Richardson*

URBAN TRACTS



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Jenny Richardson

*Urban Tracts, Book 5*

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# Author

Jenny Richardson is a woman from a working-class background. As a result of passing the 11+, she has had opportunities to progress through formal education, but for many years had no vocabulary to describe the gap she felt between her own life, and that of others she was studying alongside. Jenny is a partner, a mum, a mum-in-law, a nan, a friend and a neighbour. She has chosen to spend most of her adult life making her home in the inner city, first as a youth worker in south London, then for the last forty years in Sheffield, where she still lives. She has a wide range of employment experiences, within, outside, and at the edge of the urban church: delivering government training schemes (1982-1990); a national co-ordinating role with the Evangelical Urban Training Project, which became Unlock (1993-2002); a national training Lifelong Learning role with the Church Army (2003-2010); work with an asylum charity, training volunteers of many nationalities (2010-2014); and self-employment, under the banner of “Kitchen Table Learning” (2010-2016). She is part of an inner city Anglican parish, and is a PCC member. She and her husband initiated, and continue to host a monthly informal meal, as part of parish life, with conversation and reflection on life, faith and politics. Studying for an MA in Adult Education with Theological Reflection enabled (1996-2001) her to make sense of these varied experiences. Her faith has been, and continues to be, challenged, honed and nurtured by the realities of life in a vibrant yet challenging urban context.

# 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.

These 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

At a grammar school in Surrey (in the days of the 11+) I had no vocabulary to describe the gap I felt between my own life, and that of others. In this tract, I'll weave together my experiences and learning about adult learning with observations and experiences as a lay person in the church — including being part of an eclectic group that currently meets around a meal in our home — in the hope that it will offer insights into the pool of understanding about adult learning, relevant for mission in an urban area in the UK.

Much of my experience has been with those from a white working-class background, and that will be my focus. I've learned from many people over the years, and I'm grateful. In this tract, I've tried to give credit where I can — but if I've learned something from you, and not acknowledged it, I'm sorry!

In the early 1980s, Geoff (now my husband) and I had independently moved into the Hyde Park flats in Sheffield, worshipping at the local Anglican church, where we met and later married. Together our sense of calling was to stay put, and we believed that 'life in all its fullness' was ours, wherever we happened to be. We were living in the flats when the council decided to demolish the block, a process that took about two years. Neighbours and friends gradually moved away, and there was a general sense of decline in the area. Our house group ran a weekly café in the community centre — one of the few activities there at the time. We found ourselves increasingly under strain...

Was this our faith problem? If we trusted God, then we wouldn't be (shouldn't be) feeling like this. Did we need to muster our personal spiritual resources to claim this 'life in all its fullness' in this context? However, as we discovered others in the area, including Christians, who were feeling the same, the penny dropped. The problem was the situation, not us. Inadequate housing (by this time we were living in our accommodation with a one-year-old child); being forgotten in the processes of clearance and demolition; an inability to plan; losing our neighbours; decisions about our lives being made by faceless bureaucrats. We were experiencing powerlessness. It all added up to recognising that it wasn't us! But — what about the 'life in all its fullness' that we held to be one of our central beliefs? We realised that our theology had to change, although we wouldn't have phrased it like that at the time!



Figure 1: Left 1985: Jenny Richardson inside her Hyde Park flat. Photo: Dennis Rudge; Right 1992: Start of demolition of Hyde Park B block Photo: Geoff Richardson.

We had engaged in contextual theology — we might even say liberation theology. We began with experience (living in inadequate housing), and then moved through analysis and reflection (What's going on here? What does our faith and the Bible say when we place them alongside our experience?), and finally through to action. As we, like others, moved from the flats, we learned that life in all its fullness needs structural and societal change as well as individual: our understanding of God had been too small.

I believe this process of learning is key for the transformation of individuals, the church, and the wider world, and the rest of this tract will delve into this proposition some more.

# Chapter 1

## The Urban Church and Adult Learning

In this chapter I will draw on my varied experiences, and insights from others, to highlight some key issues about adult learning with the urban church.

### 1.1 Mind the Gap: Why Don't Many Working-Class People Go to Church?

While working with Unlock, I met a woman who described her first visit to a church. Instructions to juggle several books, while handling two small children, left her feeling embarrassed, inadequate, and determined to avoid the place in the future.


Perhaps going to church for the first time is a bit like the average church leader venturing into a betting shop and wondering: “Who is going to see me going in? What’s it like in there? How do I pay? Where do I sit? Will anyone show me what to do?”. Most church congregations, unaware of their quaint customs, are alien places for working-class people (and probably others).

In 1972, Jim Hart was working for the Evangelical Urban Training Project (EUTP, which became Unlock). In his ground-breaking workbook *Learning Without Books*, he referred to ‘those who can read but don’t’ and the term ‘non-book culture’ emerged. Bill Bullin, working later alongside Jim Hart, drew up an analysis of the differences between book and non-book people in a short document ‘How the Other Half Learn’.

Bill Bullin described these lists as a rough guide to the differences between book and non-book people. While people can’t be labelled and put into neat boxes, the lists are



a way of understanding the cultural differences between middle- and working-class people.



### "HOW THE OTHER HALF LEARN"

Every person is unique. These charts highlight some typical differences between "book people" and "non book people" but they are rough guides. People and Communities cannot be neatly put into boxes and differences have nothing to do with intelligence. All human beings have masses of 'brain power' which they are never helped to 'unlock' and use.

### "HOW WE BEHAVE"

BOOK PEOPLE	NON BOOK PEOPLE
• We 'opt' for Further Education.	• We look forward to leaving school (if we go regularly).
• We collect books.	• We collect badges, beer mats, ornaments.
• We have lots of books at home.	• We have few if any books at home.
• We study alone.	• We learn in groups.
• We have studies.	• We have work rooms (garage, sewing etc).
• We like peace to study.	• We like background noise/music.
• We use watches, clocks, diaries, filofaxes and calendars.	• We act when the time is 'right', or when the kids are ready.
• We learn then act.	• We act then learn.
• We read the Times, Telegraph, Independent, Guardian or Scotsman.	• We read the Sun, Mirror, Star, Today or Record.

"THE CHURCH AND US"	
BOOK PEOPLE	NON BOOK PEOPLE
•We go regularly.	•We go for special events.
•It's like going to the dentist. You may not feel like getting up and going but you come away feeling good. Nothing needs doing.	•It's like going to the dentist. You're a bag of nerves. Everything is bad and needs fixed. You come away vowing never to go again.
•Our church is friendly and welcoming.	•We feel outsiders.
•People used to think they had to dress up to go to church. now some people even wear jeans. It doesn't matter as long as they are clean!	•I've only got two jumpers and both are badly stained. I had to 'lend' a jumper off my neighbour to go.
•We become leaders.	•We are taught to be followers.
•There are so few willing workers. We are left to do everything.	•Everything has to be done their way. I couldn't do it the way they do it.
•They need us to take on responsible roles for them.	•We need enabled, supported and trained.
•We go miles for good teaching.	•We are loyal to our church and community.
•People come from miles to hear our minister/vicar/pastor.	•They send lay preachers for miles to keep our services going. We never get asked, or trained.
•We move around a lot. It's our work really.	•We like to stay in one place all our lives but there are no jobs now.
•We have deep Bible studies.	•We never get a chance to share our stories or ideas. We feel stupid asking our questions. They never get answered.
•The church trains its leaders in our methods.	•The church trains its leaders in their methods.

"THE CHURCH AND US"	
BOOK PEOPLE	NON BOOK PEOPLE
•Our churches are full & growing. Modern, rich, suburban or city centre. The worship is heavenly.	•Our churches are empty, old, cold, poor and covered in barbed wire. It's as cold as hell in winter.
•We used to give everyone five books when they came but now we use the O.H.P. more.	•The pages are falling out of the hymn book. Someone copies out choruses by hand for us.
•We go to church by car. Someone keeps guard.	•We walk to church.
•We get to church in plenty of time to prepare ourselves.	•We pray 'God don't let me be late again' and get dirty looks when we are.
•The children go out for junior church -bless them.	•The kids run about and join in, bless 'em.
•The services are so peaceful.	•Sometimes you can hardly hear yourself think.
•We go but don't believe.	•We don't go but do believe.

Figure 2: 'How the Other Half Learn' by Bill Bullin and Jim Hart. Images from [Unlock](#).

In 2013-15, a Church of England initiative, [Developing Church Growth in Deprived Areas](#) aimed to learn from and develop existing case studies of mission work that were

seeing a growth in Christian disciples. I evaluated one of these case studies, ‘This is not a project’, in [Hull Deanery](#), illustrates the ongoing challenges for the church in urban areas. It attempted to offer a viable model of discipleship and mission leadership:

“This will be how to build on a very solid but under-developed foundation; a foundation of incarnational ministries that have survived their first flushes and now represent the best hope, arguably the only real hope, of the body of Christ remaining manifest in very large parts of Hull.”

The initiative supported and encouraged the development of five Mission Apprentices who came from the areas they would be working in. Although the traditional church had given them some positive experiences of faith, there had been difficulties, and they had come to faith and been nurtured by their respective organisations. They continued to share their Christian beliefs in their local contexts, drawing others to faith. Through reflection on practice and learning from peers, they became more effective.

Aware of the gulf that so easily exists between the church and day to day life, and inspired by the South American base community model, Geoff and I began Haven@Table in 2009. It’s a monthly informal meal in our home, drawing in a variety of people. It is a ‘shared meal, where we talk together about life, faith, politics, spirituality, with a few minutes’ quiet reflection [and] includes those who’ve been people of faith for a while, and those who are exploring spirituality. In the words of one of our regulars: if you can eat, you’re in.’



Figure 3: 2015 A review of Haven@Table, at the end of a meal, with everyone writing and drawing notes on the paper tablecloth. Photo: Jenny Richardson.

Physical space has been important — we have considered moving to a larger premises, like a church hall, but the consensus has always been to be in a home — and not



always ours. Attempts at formal theological learning would have gone down like a lead balloon! We do our theology in an *ad hoc* fashion, as we share food, stories, pictures, songs, poems, prayers, reflections, tears, and laughter.

Since March 2020, like many other people, we have met on Zoom, with occasional times together in a garden. The depth and reality of conversation, as people check in with each other around the virtual table, is an indication that trust has already built up.

## 1.2 Mind the Gap: Why Don't Many Working-Class People Like Learning in Church?

My work with Unlock included sharing its understanding with those training for mission and ministry. I recall a training session in a Christian college: we were discussing culture, and the tendency for churches to assume a more middle-class lifestyle, when a young woman had a light bulb moment, understanding for the first time the dissonance between her life and upbringing, and the expectations of her well-meaning but unaware church.

"HOW WE THINK"		"HOW WE LEARN"	
BOOK PEOPLE	NON BOOK PEOPLE	BOOK PEOPLE	NON BOOK PEOPLE
• We think in <u>words</u> .	• We think in <u>pictures</u> .	• We learn alone.	• We learn in groups.
• We think in straight <u>logical</u> lines.	• We think in patterns of pictures which connect for us.	• We enjoy structured teaching.	• We like imaginative ways of learning.
• We rely on writing.	• We rely on memory.	• We like top-down teaching.	• We like bottom-up discovery.
• We store what we want to remember on paper in files and now on discs.	• We convert what we learn into memorable experiences.	• We take it all very seriously!	• We like a laugh!
• Our thinking is calm, cool and removed (cold).	• Our thinking is emotionally involved. (hot).	• We pass exams.	• We won't jump through your hoops.
• We generalise.	• We are specific and concrete.	• We like expert teachers.	• Our teachers help us discover we are experts.
• We continually search for new ideas.	• We value traditions, customs, songs, proverbs, sayings etc.	• We like routine, regularity, and order.	• We like the unusual, unexpected, or special event.
• We dissect what we 'know'.	• We add to what we know.	• We learn and often don't do.	• We learn to do.
• We have a broad vocabulary.	• We share our own pool of words.	• We like references, handouts, notes, answers, formula, exact detail.	• We like questions, visits, swapping stories, humour, colour exaggeration catchy sayings.
• We think.	• We know.		

Figure 4: Further extracts from 'How the Other Half Learn' by Bill Bullin and Jim Hart. Images from [Unlock](#).

More recently, I was in an inner-city church where a bishop preached at a special service, encouraging the congregation not to think too highly of themselves. Whilst

this is a valid message in a church full of successful professional people, in an area looked down on by the rest of the city, it was inappropriate for a congregation where many were struggling with the basics of life. Emphasising the value of each person in God's eyes would have been more helpful theology. Someone reckoned it was unlikely that anyone was listening anyway! That was probably the truth, given the low effectiveness of teaching in the didactic style of a lecture.

As already mentioned, the Evangelical Urban Training Project (EUTP) began in 1972, and the urban church is indebted to Neville Black and Jim Hart for their early pioneering work in urban mission, as recorded in their handwritten workbook *Learning without books*. And yet, at the end of this document, they state: 'We do not make any claims that these EUTP principles are new. We are only keeping alive a tradition that's been around in the Christian church all along.'

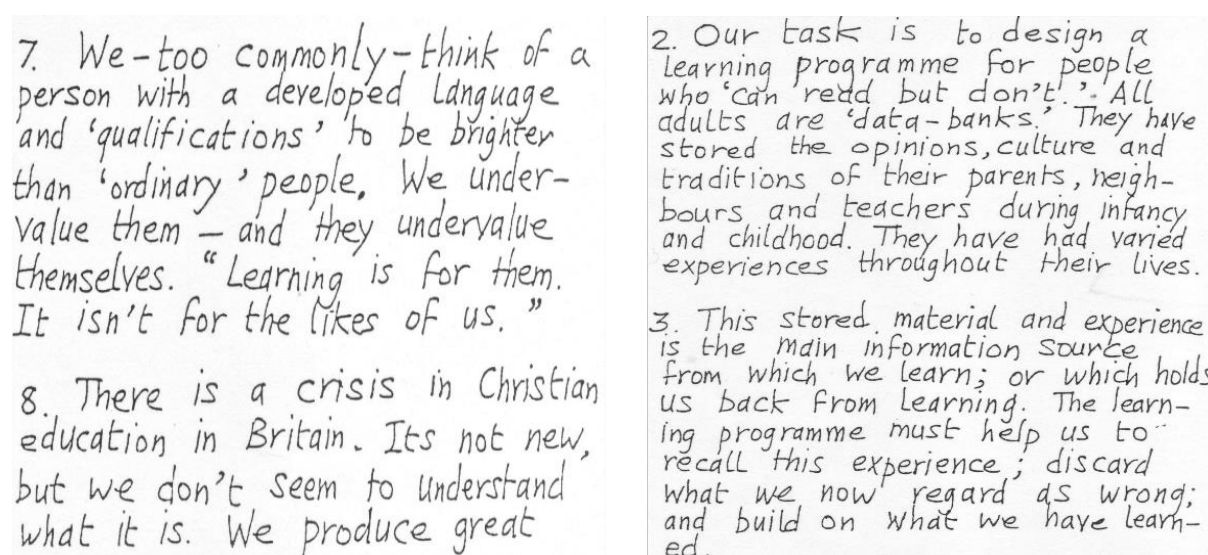


Figure 5: 'How the Other Half Learns' by Roy Dorey in [City Cries](#), Issue 33, Autumn 1995 (p.16).

Sadly, these issues in Christian education identified remain true today. Images from X.

There are issues of functional literacy as well as culture.

"A 2011 government survey of adult literacy skills found that 14.9% (or 1 in 7) of adults in England have literacy levels at or below Entry Level 3, which is equivalent to the literacy skills expected of a nine to 11-year-old." ([Literacy Trust](#))

Comparing this with the literacy level of the Good News Bible, which describes itself as "the world's first truly "easy to read" Bible translation", and has a reading age of 12+, indicates another aspect of the gulf that exists. ([Home - Good News Bible](#))

For someone used to a tabloid newspaper and social media posts, being faced with a substantial book that they struggle to read is formidable.

## 1.3 Bridging the Gap: Connecting Peoples' and Communities' Stories with the Bible and Other Parts of Our Faith Tradition

At the end of the 1990s, EUTP changed its name to [Unlock](#). We created a new mission statement, still in use today, which reflects its educational and theological methods. In designing the logo there were long discussions about the place of the cross: large and prominent, on the left-hand side of the key to hold onto it, or smaller within the city skyline. The final choice shows the cross immersed in the life of the city. Those of us who live there need Christ alongside us.



Figure 6: [Unlock](#) logos. Images from [Unlock](#).

The familiar parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) is consistently interpreted from the perspective of the rich young man—the point of view of those who have resources. I recall looking at this story in the 1980s with a group from inner-urban Sheffield. A group member who had been through some rough times, said ‘It’s not the ones you’d expect who help you when you’re down’. And the Bible story was then illuminated by similar stories and experiences from others.

The account of James and John seeking to sit with Jesus in glory (Mark 10:35-45) is generally interpreted as an exhortation not to think highly of yourself. An Unlock worker in Hull described how they saw this passage as an affirmation that we all count, and no-one is higher and mightier than anyone else. Bible reading is done generally through the lens of those who have been successful in society’s eyes, and not from the perspective of those whose achievement is simply being alive and resilient in the face of constant obstacles.

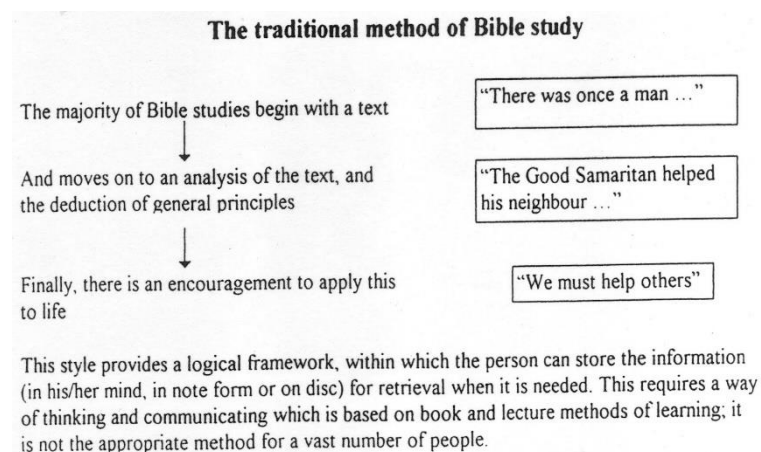
Theology always comes from a context, with the middle-class and white context generally seen as normal. Most church leaders and teachers come from this culture; the

inherited and transmitted doctrine and understanding of God therefore comes from that context. Theology that comes from experiences in a different context, on the other hand, is considered deviant, suspect, and possibly dangerous, with counsel to listen to those in authority who preach the truth.

I visited a vicar working in an urban area, and he recounted how he'd been shaken by seeing an accident on the way to a house group. He expected the group to show empathy by asking questions about what had happened. Instead, they shared tales of times they'd witnessed accidents. Story was in solidarity with story, without analysis.

Sharing Unlock's approach at one conference, with a middle-class, theologically educated audience, I expected questions asking me to justify my theological approach; instead, one participant was reminded of an experience in his youth and surprised us all by standing to recount a personal tale. The example of responses to the parable of the Good Samaritan reminded him of a time when he'd received unexpected help.

These examples illustrate the vital importance of stories, with the implication that bringing a Bible story alongside experiences in solidarity is more effective than analysis of the text. The implications of these approaches are teased out further in the extracts below.



## Unlock's method of Bible study

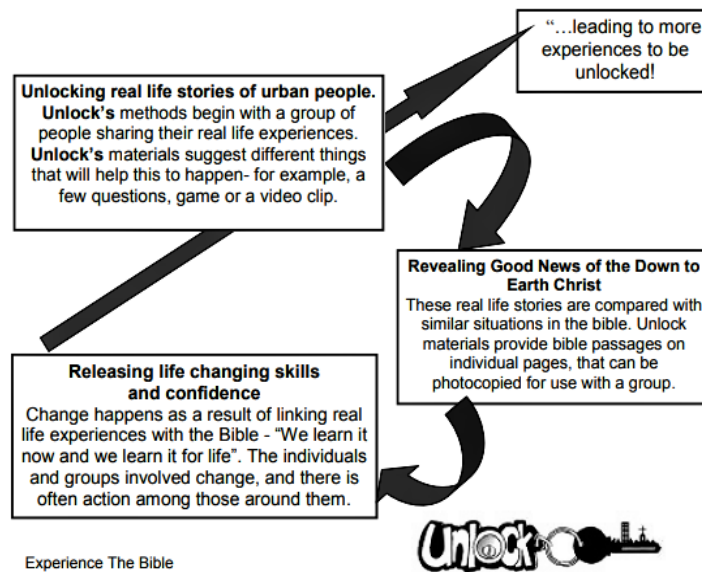


Figure 7: [Unlock](#) bible study diagrams. Images from [Unlock](#).

In the 1970s, Janet Rourke was a Church Army worker in Liverpool, and part of EUTP. She was aware of the need to affirm those who had been rejected by most forms of church education and developed what she termed 'Simple Bible Studies'. She said:

I have always worked with Urban people, but my Christian experience has taken me away from my own working-class roots. I have been moulded into a middle-class person. In East London I hadn't really been part of the community and when I went to Huyton (Merseyside) I had to look again at my roots. What had the church done to me? How much of my ideas about the Gospel were preconceived? It was a great relief when I found that I could stop having to go to the top of a view in the Lake District and say, "Oh! Isn't God's creation wonderful." I could experience God in my own urban scene. The Bible speaks to everyday life, and I needed some way of relating it to the small groups I am working with. These Bible studies have been used by a group of seven people. I doubt whether any of them read more than a newspaper. They are not book people. I don't think there's a book in

These [Bible studies](#) encourage people to share — chat about — things that have happened to them, and then introduce a Bible story alongside these personal experiences, spotting connections between them. Story in solidarity with story is affirming, enlightening, challenging, and inspiring. The Bible passage is produced on an A4 sheet, as a dramatic reading, rather than expecting someone to handle a large book full of text.



In the 1980s I was invited to work alongside an experienced facilitator, with a group of women from different urban churches, using a process of contextual theology. As the women chatted about their experiences of church, they complained about the lack of young people in their congregations, and the bad behaviour of young people in general. The problem of local young people disturbing a session by climbing on the roof became the subject for exploration; the urban context was part of the learning process, rather than a hindrance to it. The women decided to pursue this topic, and reminisced about their own teenage years, and recognised similarities between themselves and today's young people. They learned more by talking with young people they knew, and those on the streets; interviewing in local schools; and reading historical quotations about young people. They looked at relevant Bible passages, and when discussing Jesus in the temple at 12 years old, one commented, 'If he'd been mine, I'd have pasted him!'. She was then shocked by her reaction! She had been taught that Jesus was never wrong. This was a turning point. The women's attitudes changed, and they became more accepting of disruptive young people in their churches and chatted to local teenagers outside the chip shop. They went on to encourage others in their churches to change their attitudes too.

In 1997, we had fun with one particular [Unlock Bible study pack](#) entitled 'Go for It'. Watching the film [The Full Monty](#) in Sheffield, where it was originally filmed was a privilege. It's a comedy based on a group of men in Sheffield, who share a familiar frustration and resignation about unemployment, solidarity with their mates, and humour. I was not surprised that it was a talking point for those I met as I went around Sheffield. What surprised me more was the reaction of those in other cities. It drew discussion about life from those I met as I travelled around the housing estate areas of several cities. Following the pattern of Janet Rourke's 'Simple Bible Studies', the film 'unlocked' stories of peoples' life experiences in natural ways, enabling them to talk about what's going on the screen, and then moving to their own stories. Key themes for storytelling emerged quickly, and recognising Biblical resonance was straightforward.

Practical creativity is important in non-book learning; it is a key to insight and development that would otherwise be unavailable. At a national Faith in the City conference in the 1990s, with equal numbers of ordained clergy and local people from housing estates, my task was to devise and oversee some small group sessions, reimagining the urban church. In one group, I heard that the clergy began by discussing the nature and form of the church, with someone carefully noting the salient points. Meanwhile, a few of those from housing estates were ignoring them and getting on with the practical tasks of building; they were thinking with their hands. I found that, while the theologically trained were comfortable with abstract discussions, many of them became immobilised when asked to join those who preferred the manual work of creating the church. There is some profound learning

here about power sharing, and the body of Christ. The other lesson we learned is that we should have informed the cleaners! As people returned to their group rooms the next morning, their part-constructed churches had been cleared to the side!<sup>1</sup>

The church in Wisbech in Cambridgeshire, like the rest of the old Fenland market town, was [challenged](#) by the arrival of people from Eastern Europe. It used its homely Lodge as a base for a workshop entitled ‘[Sensing Salvation](#)’, [a project for developing church growth](#) in deprived areas working with two non-church schools in an innovative arts project with different artists in residence. The Anglo-Catholic spirituality of the space resonated with those who had come from traditional Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox backgrounds. The priest there, with professional art skills, worked with church members to develop a creative approach. Church members, and others in the community, made giant puppets, and formed a spectacular street procession. Established church members, working with the newcomers to the area, together created something new, with all the participants being able to learn and develop their faith.



Figure 8: Caption. Creation of Giant puppets. Sensing Salvation project.

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of some EUTP creative work at ECUM's 3<sup>rd</sup> National conference see [City Cries](#), Spring 1995 (p. 67). See also [City Cries](#), October 1991, Autumn 1993 (p. 10), and Spring 1992 (p. 16).

## 1.4 Training for Urban Mission

In the late 90s, while working for Unlock, and living in the inner city with our young family, I studied for an MA in Adult Education, which was developed by the Church of England with University College, Chester. Its part-time and open learning approach enabled my work with Unlock to inform my studies and vice versa — an effective way of enabling academic learning by reflection on practice.

Applying for this course, I outlined my then 20+ years of varied experience as an educator with young people and adults. The university academic I spoke to was uncertain about my suitability. However, when I mentioned that I had a degree in Maths from 26 years earlier, the door opened, with more value placed on an irrelevant academic qualification than many years' experience. Practical experience was therefore not enough to open the door to a relevant learning opportunity in the church, even though, 'There is a growing evidence base suggesting that indigenous leaders [...] are able to lead more effectively, especially on estates and in working class areas.'

Increasing reliance on technology further excludes people. I recall visiting someone in a one room flat, attempting to jump through Diocesan hoops to become a recognised church worker. He had an old worn-out laptop he'd been given balanced on his bed, the only place in the room to sit. A Diocese recently put pressure on a local church member, in leadership, to attend online training, ignoring the fact that the family had one laptop, shared between several children, who were home schooling during lockdown.

In the noughties, I had responsibility for Lifelong Learning with commissioned Church Army evangelists around the UK. I was heartened to find a significant number of people in professional ministry who were clearly from working class backgrounds, and building on the original vision of Wilson Carlile in 1882 who trained those he described as ordinary lay people. The historical roots of the Church Army were with the urban poor, and this continues today alongside ministry in a wider range of contexts, some close to the institutional church and some more pioneering. Over the years, some working-class Church Army Evangelists have moved to ordination. My hunch is that their acceptance by the Church Army for ministry has opened the ordination door for them. The distinction between lay and ordained in the Church Army has become increasingly blurred in recent years, with some Church Army Evangelists seeking ordination to lead new pioneering churches, and its Mission Community no longer exclusively lay. It strikes me that a [route via the Church Army](#) to full time ministry, including ordination, may still be one of the few options open to those without academic qualifications from urban areas.

No summary about learning and urban mission would be complete without the [Urban Theology Union](#) (formerly Urban Theology Unit) founded in 1970 by John Vincent. It took a lead in introducing contextual theology, enabling urban mission practitioners to develop their academic learning to make sense of the Gospel in their place. In its early days, a study year offered students and practitioners an immersion in urban mission and radical theology. Its style of teaching has always been through shared learning between course attendees and the course leaders; for example, a Graduate Study Seminar where students and book writers come together four times a year is the core of the PhD level learning. As a trustee for several years, I have seen the cash flow struggle, as Methodist ministerial education has moved away from urban specialism in a small theological training organisation, to be absorbed into more mainstream training. I've also been part of meetings grappling with location, in the search for somewhere authentic for urban theology, while meeting appropriate expectations for disabled access and technological advances.

UTU has consistently trodden the tightrope between recognition in the academy, through validation of learning up to PhD level, and recognition and validation on the street. It has recently begun to establish a wider range of non-accredited teaching, and retains its prophetic edge in a [Kingdom Evangelism pack](#) of writings, poems, and stories of faith, which wrestle with sharing the good news of a kingdom that gladdens the hearts of those in poverty. Throughout my journey, I have experienced UTU as a hub where many in urban mission, from different denominations and theological backgrounds, have found a home, learning from each other, grappling with social and political issues, and developing radical theology.

## 1.5 Educators with Attitude!

In my Unlock role as a trainer of its regional workers, I observed two of them sharing Unlock's learning style with participants. They became confused about the order of the questions and jumped from one part of their programme outline to another, introducing unplanned questions that I thought lost the continuity of the conversations. Proposed small group structures also appeared in disarray. However, the workers' attitudes to those in the group were ones of service; they came with an expectation of spiritual insight from the participants and affirmed all their contributions. At the end of the workshop there were warm positive comments from participants, who had felt valued by the educators. The 'wrong' questions had

produced insights, treasured by the group, and participants were keen to use contextual Bible study methods themselves.

My dissertation research project for my MA in Adult Education with Theological Reflection, focussed on radical theological educators in urban UK contexts—those who help people work out the links between life and God for themselves. I wanted to know what skills, knowledge and attitude radical theological educators need, to be competent in their role, and how they learn these things. I interviewed learners, educators, and trainers of educators, in a variety of urban locations.

I discovered that the main attribute of a radical theological educator is a gritty spirituality and a positive attitude, things like: having a prayerful approach; respecting people; being resilient; hoping for change; taking risks and getting things done; being willing to serve the group and learn from them. Attitude is then backed up with: people and group skills; listening and asking questions, affirming group members' contributions; providing people space to work things out; handling conflict; and keeping a group focussed on the task. In last place are attributes such as: knowledge of the methods of contextual theology knowledge of the method to run the group; knowledge of theories about society and community; and biblical knowledge.

I was looking for skills, knowledge and attitude / spirituality and discovered that the most important expertise for radical theological educators is having the right attitude, and a robust spirituality with skills and knowledge secondary. A tidy method was of little importance! It's a reminder that following Christ is not a question of obeying rules and methods, but rather about loving God and your neighbour. The development of radical theological educators depends first on spirituality and motivation, with conscientisation that comes by living in a deprived urban area, or by listening to those who live there. My conclusion is that the urban poor are the most effective trainers of those who would like to work as radical theological educators in the UK's inner cities and housing estates, engaging with those who are socially excluded.

## 1.6 Insights from Adult Learning Theories and Theology

My approach to adult learning draws on both educational and theological processes. I have found [Yvonne Craig's six models](#) of education helpful as a framework to recognise some of the key elements, which she labels as liberal, progressive, humanistic,

technological, dogmatic, and radical education. I offer my perspectives of each of these categories based on my experience.

### Liberal Education

A great deal of Christian education occurs through the transmission of concepts and ideas, in the style of a lecture or in written form (usually lengthy!). Although the medium may have changed from lecture theatre to screen, the style remains the same. Those selected for ministry based on their ability to handle its abstract approach, have their learning style reinforced in theological colleges. They then go on to unconsciously expect others to learn in the same way, excluding those from a non-book culture, who think in a more concrete way. A comparison of '[God with sleeves rolled up](#)' to '[The presupposition of the incarnation of Christ](#)' is the pre-existent logos and the Christian doctrine of the trinity. According to Barth [...] the incarnation of Christ is an incarnation of the whole Godhead but by means of an incarnation of the second mode of God to whom has been peculiarly appropriated the task of redemption' illustrates the point.

### Progressive Education

The escalating number of foodbanks in recent years is an example of action arising from this style of learning: church members become aware of a need, and provide resources to alleviate it, without addressing the root causes of food [poverty](#):

The desire to challenge unjust structures can become problematic when the need to offer loving service is a priority. This may mean that while food banks need to highlight the presenting issues and the reasons why they are there, the underlying themes may have to be suppressed in order to attract and to keep attracting donations and volunteers. [...] the stories of users may not emerge as powerfully as the prophetic narratives they could be, making food banks more about working "for" people than "with" them.

This progressive education is popular in the church, enabling learners to focus on particular social issues, and take informed, responsible action towards incremental social change. It appears to be supporting people and moving towards justice, while avoiding thorny questions of power and leaving unjust structures in place.

### Humanistic Education

Part of my commitment to a local church in the 80s was leadership of a house group. I instinctively used my developmental group work background, and the group became



a safe place for people to be affirmed, grow in self-confidence and faith, and develop trusting relationships. This use of small groups as a tool for personal development and enhancement reached a peak in [sensitivity group training](#) in the late 70s: 'The purpose of this group is to explore the process of the group in the here and now.'

Aspects of formation, and discipleship, with support and guidance fall into this category. They are a process of personal and spiritual growth, and an individual becomes increasingly who they are and could be, as they mature in their relationships with God, others, and themselves.

## Technological Education

Learning in church often follows a process which I have heard referred to as the "Sit by Nellie method". Chris often does the Bible reading. Pat watches Chris, then has a go herself, imitating Chris. Chris tells Pat what she's done well, what she needs to do differently, and Pat continues until she is a carbon copy of Chris. Pat will have picked up Chris' idiosyncrasies, but the church leader is happy that Pat's contribution will help the services to continue to run smoothly. She's a competent performer in her role. [Free Video for Training New Church Greeters](#) shows an example.

Philosophical and political choices from Thatcher onwards have influenced approaches to learning, with [National Vocational Qualifications](#) (NVQs) a competence based and economics-led model that accredits training for competence in workplace tasks.

Technological education has its roots in economic effectiveness, and the role of the educator is instruction, with the teacher / supervisor deciding what needs to be learned (competences) and the learner moulded to the tasks needed by the organisation. In the church it has the danger of adult learning being used as a tool to domesticate the laity, training people to be cogs in its organisational wheels. This appears to be increasing, as paid ministerial and pastoral positions become scarcer.

## Dogmatic Education

A charismatic teacher or leader is in authority when they claim to hear the truth from God and proclaim the message in a [persuasive manner from the front](#). Particularly in an urban church, where people have been failed by the education system, those listening believe they are ignorant and cannot understand things. Mistrusting their own judgement, they obey, and anyone disagreeing is accused of lacking faith, or disobedience to God.

A different style of authority can be seen in those churches where clericalism affords deference to the church leader. Even unintentionally, the authority of the system

around the priest, with their clothing and exclusive right to preside over the sacraments, creates a power imbalance and [submissiveness to ‘Father’](#).

In an urban church, dogmatic education where ‘preaching Bible truths’ to passive learners is dominant, is in my view, one of the most dangerous of all the educational styles. Even in an effective communication style, like a stand-up comedian or a trade union rep, it reinforces people as powerless. The teacher does not need to control the learning and the Holy Spirit can be trusted to guide into truth.

## Radical Education

I believe that power is a key factor in any conversation about adult learning in the urban church and my approach to learning is heavily influenced by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. In his renowned book [Pedagogy of the Oppressed](#), he highlighted concerns about power and oppression. He sought to provide processes for people to be subjects rather than objects, describing praxis as reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.

Clips from the film *The Full Monty* in Unlock’s mission pack, resonating with peoples’ experiences, are an example of a Freirean approach. He listened and identified a community’s key issues, and then presented them with that issue in a different context (with a visit, a photograph, or a picture). He called this a ‘code’: a concrete representation of a familiar problem, raising questions and showing the problem without providing solutions. Freire would ask, ‘Does it happen round here?’, and they made the link, motivating them to ‘act for change’. The parables of Jesus function in a similar way with his audiences.

In this expression of radical education, the role of the educator is to act as a facilitator and questioner, and education is a process of conscientisation and empowerment. Freire advocated teamwork learning, where learners and teachers learn together in dialogue, contrasting this with a banking model of education, in which the teacher deposits knowledge in the learner.

## Experiential Learning ...

Sharing stories and experiences as a resource for learning are at the heart of adult learning in an urban context. [David Kolb’s theory](#) is that the learner’s subjective experience is the centre of learning, and he describes learning as ‘the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience’. It is our ability to actively reflect on our experiences which facilitates our learning and development. Kolb describes the learning process as a [cycle](#).



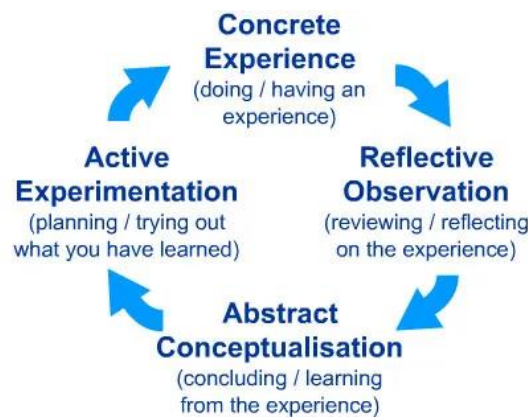


Figure 9: [Benefits of Experiential Learning & Kolb's Learning Cycle for Training.](#)

... and theology

[Laurie Green](#), an urban theologian and former Bishop of Bradwell writes:

I have always been very ambitious for theology. I want to bring it out of the closet, or the scholar's den, and into the world where people wrestle with the problems which radically affect their lives and the lives of those around them. When they do this, time and again, they find that theology is a tool which leads to radically new ways of seeing things—and new ways of living!

His explanation of a '[doing theology](#)' process weaves together Freire's radical education approach and Kolb's theory of experiential learning, with the resources of the Bible and other faith resources.

Participants begin with their real-life experiences and explore factual information crystalising the underlying issues. Then, finding and delving into resonating stories in the Bible and the Christian tradition reveals new insights, which lead to change, transformation, action... and a new experience,... the process continues again and again, hence the spiral.



Figure 10: [Intro to Doing Theology Spiral.](#)

Andrew Bradstock and Chris Rowland show how this view of theology is rooted in [history](#):

The radicals in Christianity stress the presence of God in the persons of the poor and also active in history... the emphasis is on experience as a prior “text” which must condition the way in which Scripture and tradition are read and the “signs of the times” interpreted.

In conversation with some local church leaders during a visit to Nicaragua in 2013 with the [Amos Trust](#), I was intrigued to know how they engaged local people in theological learning. When I asked the question, the response was a description of how the church members leave the building at the end of a service and go and clean the streets. That said it all! They’d walked the streets on the way to church, then worshipped and reflected on scripture. Action was a natural response to their encounter with a loving God.

Referring again to the [work of Unlock](#), their mission statement sums up its educational and theological processes, very much mirroring Kolb’s learning cycle and Laurie Green’s doing theology spiral.

- Unlocking real life stories of urban people
- Revealing Good News of the Down to Earth Christ
- Releasing life changing skills and confidence

## God as a learner

Exploring questions of adult learning and theology in the church led me to question my understanding of God as a teacher. [John Hull](#) points out that the church has exaggerated the status of the teacher at the expense of the learner, and raises the question of whether God, who is all knowing, can learn. He argues that humanity, created by God, is capable of genuine creativity and novelty, and therefore God, in relationship with creation, needs to continually add to God’s knowledge. ‘In keeping omnisciently abreast of this change, [God may be said to learn](#).’ So those who continue to learn reflect the image of God, and groups where all aspire to be learners and not teachers cannot help but change the dynamic of the learning process.

## 1.7 Considering culture

After the 18<sup>th</sup>-Century Enlightenment era, the philosophy of Modernism dominated, with science assumed as the source for truth and reality and an expectation of progress based on scientific knowledge. Within this culture, knowledge was imparted, primarily by reading—identified in EUTP’s analysis as book culture. Those who didn’t read, either through illiteracy or choice, were irrelevant to or deviant from this mainstream culture. This non-book culture could be described as a pre-enlightenment, premodern culture, with a reliance on gut instincts and folk religion. A postmodern era emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup>-Century. Within this era, individuals’ experiences and feelings appear increasingly the basis for knowledge, and overarching truths are seen as oppressive.

Theology in the modern era was fixed, with scripture interpreted through the lens of the dominant culture to arrive at the truth. In postmodern culture, scripture is interpreted through the varied lenses of experience leading to varied contextual theologies. In this framework, an urban housing estate culture is now one accepted lens through which it is recognised as valid to understand God.

Postmodern views have some similarities with aspects of the premodern worldview: experiences and emotions are a valid source of information; there is no longer one form of authority; patterns and connections appear to be more persuasive than logical linear thinking. Technological developments, with the accompanying surfacing of social media, continue to impact mainstream communication. Its content parallels non-book culture in many significant ways, with short snippets of information, audio clips, videos, and images. In the 1990s, I created this brief analysis of these different eras of modernity.

## UK Cultures?

### Tabloid / traditional (Pre-modern)

With emotion  
 History—our story is not told  
 Tradition/ heritage  
 Rely on memory  
 Learn in groups  
 Distrust authority  
 Like bottom up learning  
 Learn from experience  
 Our context is looked down on  
 Think in patterns of pictures that connect  
 Collect things  
 Specific and concrete  
 Like the unexpected, special events  
 Are not considered experts  
 Like stories



### Modern

No emotion  
 History—a grand narrative  
 Search for new ideas  
 Store learning on paper (and disc)  
 Learn alone  
 Respect authority—& hold positions of authority  
 Like top down teaching—and teach others  
 Learn from books  
 There's only one context—ours  
 Think in linear, logical lines  
 Collect books  
 Abstract  
 Like routine, regularity, order  
 Like experts—and are experts  
 Like factual content



### Post-modern

With emotion  
 History—lots of small stories  
 Search for new ideas  
 Store learning on disc  
 Learn alone  
 There is no one authority, things are relative  
 Like learning from peers  
 Learn from imagination  
 See things in their own context  
 Think in patterns and connections  
 Collect discs, email and website addresses  
 Sensory data  
 Like opportunity  
 There are no experts—just different perspectives  
 Like stories



Ho/nonbk/008



Figure 11: Caption. Image from Unlock.

# Chapter 2

## What Have we Learned?

Neither academic attainment nor economic achievement can adequately measure intelligence, skill, or wisdom. The UK's deprived areas have vibrant, resilient people who have been failed by the education system, and the systems of assessment and grading mean that smart people assume they are unable to learn. It is unsurprising that they have no desire to sign up for a course where they will repeat their experience of being told they are failures. Affirming people and enabling them to rebuild (or build) confidence as a learner is essential.

It is important to create a learning environment where participants can feel confident to share their stories. The layout of a room communicates the intention of the educator. An informal, comfortable, back-room style works best, where everyone can see each other. As a rough guide, a room of 6-12 people works well — larger than that and it's better to form subgroups; smaller and it can feel intense with individuals feeling put on the spot. If an educator stands at the front, with others facing them, the unstated message is that they are going to tell the others what to think.

By creating an environment where each person is accepted and valued, people can relax and be themselves, talk honestly and build mutual trust. While it's important to share power with learners, being identified as the educator in a group brings with it authority and responsibility. For example, if one or two are dominating, and preventing others from using their power, questioning the group about power sharing is appropriate. And, if necessary, action can be taken: in a medium sized group, breaking into small groups of 3 or 4 people, with dominating people in one small group works well!

It is vital to hear, respect, and value real life stories; when these are shared in empathy and solidarity in a group, they are the raw material for reflection and learning. The Bible and Christian tradition then provide further stories of God's people throughout history, offered in solidarity with those already shared.

In this tract, I have highlighted several different approaches to education: dogmatic, technological, liberal, humanistic, progressive, and radical. My experience and resulting opinion are that models of radical education and contextual theology need to be the overarching approaches to supporting discipleship in the UK's urban areas. Other models of education and theological learning are useful, but at their service rather than in control.

Off-the-shelf discipleship and learning materials are rarely appropriate; most are designed for middle-class and formally educated people, and take a top-down approach, thus domesticating learning. Large chunks of written text are not appropriate; any printed materials, including Bible passages, are best offered as short pieces of text with illustrations.

Learning is about the whole person, not just the mind. Practical stuff, creativity, and fun are important, often reaching the parts that other education misses!

Inadequate resources, short term employment and shift work, the demise of local government infrastructures — all these impact lives in our urban areas. Regular routines, including attendance at training courses, do not sit comfortably with the consequent random and fluid lifestyles of people in urban areas.

Doing theology makes a difference and change is possible! Anger and frustration are a gift, creating a passion for justice, and an energy that fuels a dynamic theological learning process. Learning helps people find their own faith and motivation without telling them what to do or coming up with pre-packaged solutions. It can help them catch glimpses of hope and provide tools and confidence to make that hope happen.

Learning and teaching are for transformation, not domestication or the maintenance of the status quo. As people discover their worth and their own power, it can be threatening for those with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

Many of the things I've learned about adult learning were summed up when I worked freelance under the title 'Kitchen Table Learning'. It's an image which encapsulates much of what I believe and think about adult learning in the urban church.



Figure 12: Kitchen Table learning logo. Commissioned artwork from Richard Duszczak, property of Jenny Richardson.

It's modelled on [Andrei Rublev's icon](#), representing the Holy Trinity: hospitality with space at the table. We create a space to welcome God into relationship with us, and we find that God welcomes us. It's also a reminder of the many times in the Gospels where Jesus chose an informal table setting to enable the most profound learning.

# Chapter 3

## Passing the Baton: What Next for Adult Learning in the Urban Church

This writing has focused on adult learning in a white working-class culture, but I hope some of the insights and principles will be helpful for those from other backgrounds, who have made their home in the UK's urban areas.

So, what next for adult learning? Answer: more of the things that work, such as those I have already described! I encourage educators not to be tempted by glossy training packages, but rather to appreciate the vibrant, lively, infuriating, gritty, fun, uncomfortable, real lives where they are, which offer a robust and solid resource for learning. And to follow the example of Jesus, who helped people learn as they went about their daily lives, telling parables about familiar things, asking questions, pointing out everyday objects, and saying 'The Kingdom of God is like that...', reminding people of scripture that resonated ('It is written...') and challenging people to live as part of a new kingdom.

Most formal training and education in the church excludes those who live in the UK's urban area, with inappropriate cultural assumptions and expectations of literacy levels. Programmes of training and education for recognised leadership within the church are, or appear to be, inaccessible for someone failed by the education system and who left school with no qualifications. These programmes have unrealistic expectations of ease of access to computers and printers, and regular classes which require regular work patterns with no family or neighbourhood crises. I would like to see those with responsibility for adult learning in the church address issues of access for working class people.

Alongside this I have questions about the selection processes for professional ministry (itself a minority group!). Those with considerable experience of urban life often have more appropriate expertise for the role than those with academic achievement. Those joining us from a middle-class book culture need to come ready to listen carefully to their new neighbours, with an assumption that all have something to teach. I recall a



comment from an older woman in an inner-city church: each time a new clergy person arrived full of enthusiasm and new ideas, she would calmly tell the rest of us, ‘Don’t worry. They’ll learn!’.

The institutional church continues to experience falling numbers and increasing irrelevance to those from all social backgrounds, regardless of its new initiatives, and is struggling to come to terms with its minority status. It strikes me that the wider church could do well to learn from the experiences and resources of urban church. Many approaches to adult learning in the church still rely on linear thinking, long texts, lectures (even with Powerpoint!), a reading list, overarching principles to apply to your own context, and an expert who corrects your work and gives the ‘right’ answers. These methods are increasingly unpalatable for a generation accustomed to visual and audio learning, searching the internet as they choose to discover relevant nuggets of information and learning that engages the senses and emotions.

As cultural change continues, minority groups who have been silenced are finding their voices, and challenging dominant world views; for example, Black Lives Matter, and the LGBTQ+ community. The urban poor, including the urban church, seem to remain strangely unheard, and my hope is that the emerging social platform for dialogue will give space for their voices. Urban Christians have much to teach their sisters and brothers in the wider UK church about embracing life at the edge of mainstream culture.

Radical theological education is a minority issue, and questions remain. Is it more effective on the edge of and outside church institutions, or rather as a resistance movement within mainstream church life and theological education where it risks being domesticated? Either way, it needs to happen!

# Conclusion

I have been writing these words sitting with my laptop at a small table in the dining room of our terraced home in inner-city Sheffield. It has been my desk since March 2020 (the first COVID-19 lockdown). I am faced with the mundane realities of inner-city life. Geoff is often working at his desk in a first-floor bedroom. The noise of developers in the mid-terrace, 100+ year-old house next door is a constant reminder of our location. The developer's sole aim is to make money, without respect for the property, the neighbourhood, those doing the work, basic building legislation, or those who will be crammed into this multiple occupancy house.

Neighbours on the other side are living with holes in their walls. As well as practical issues affecting our lives (like damage to the plaster throughout our home, and debris landing in our yard), I struggle to 'love my neighbour' when his values oppose mine: he does not live in, nor have commitment to, the area; he makes life for us and others intolerable; he is destroying features in an old house—aesthetically sad, and wasteful of resources as the planet faces a climate crisis; he exploits his workers; and he ignores health and safety. He then teaches others his methods. Geoff and I feel powerless, despite our ability to engage with the appropriate authorities.

How do I, as an adult learner in the inner city, grow and learn from this? I return to contextual theology and address my sense of powerlessness. I am unable to prevent damage to the house, the neighbourhood, or the environment.

My thoughts turn to the prophet Nehemiah. He set off with a sense of God's call and assessed the damage to the walls of Jerusalem. He then rallied others around him to work together, and alongside each other, to rebuild and repair what had been destroyed. This upset those who were used to having power, and Nehemiah organised half the people to keep an eye open for trouble, while the others got on with the job; and he made sure everyone had the basic food and shelter they needed. There was still quite a lot of sorting out to happen before the celebration party and the people organised themselves to live in a way that honoured God's laws. (Nehemiah 1-13)

So, how do I make the connections? Do I have a sense of God's call? How might I go about assessing the damage (to property and people)? Who in our neighbourhood could help with repairing this damage? Who would help us by keeping an eye open for

trouble? How do we ensure our neighbours have the resources they need? Do we need a good party?! And how do we do that in the light of COVID? What would it mean for our neighbourhood to reflect the values of the Kingdom of God? As I reflect, I recognise that the profile of the ‘oppressor’ (the developer) diminishes, and our power, plus that of our neighbours, working together increases. I have plenty of questions to continue to live with and take action on, as we move forwards!

I am discovering for the umpteenth time that doing radical theology enables learning in a constantly changing context, the fresh discovery of the transforming power of God’s Spirit, and the impetus to engage in action to bring about transformation. And I am reminded of the old Chinese proverb: I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand.

Do good things for the city where I sent you [...]. Pray to the Lord for the city where you are living, because if good things happen in the city, good things will happen to you also. (Jeremiah 29:7, Good News Bible)

# Questions for Further Consideration

- Is there a situation you are challenged by in your area at the moment? What are the issues arising from your experience? Does it ring bells with a Bible story? Explore the story. What new insights do you gain? What will you do now?
- Who says what is the right interpretation of scripture? Is there any interpretation that doesn't come from a context? Is there anything in your understanding of scripture that you don't feel should be explored from a contextual perspective?
- The editors' note says: 'The tracts are aimed at practitioners and church leaders.' Does this describe you? What is your literacy level? How appropriate and accessible is this e-book for you? Why/Why not?
- How would you describe yourself? Book or non-book? And your culture? Modern? Postmodern? Premodern? Or something else? How much of this is your innate personality and how much do you think is learned from the culture around you?
- I used an image based on Rublev's icon to describe my approach to learning and teaching. What would your image be? Draw it, or create a collage, or take a photo. A while later, return to it. What does it say to you about how you see learning and teaching?
- Yvonne Craig describes six approaches to education, that I have referred to in this tract: liberal, progressive, humanistic, technological, dogmatic, and radical education. Which is your natural preference as a learner? And as an educator, if you are one. Why?

- Giving people an appropriate space to meet is crucial. Writing this after more than two years of COVID, and the Zooming that has gone with it, providing physical space might also be interpreted as online space. How helpful is online space as a place for meeting in your context?
- How do you feel about the idea that God is a learner? Why?
- Members of a keep fit group at the community centre support each other, and welcome new people; they make collections to give to charities; and meet together to share coffee and chat several times each week. An early morning Eucharist has a handful of people in a cold building, who barely look each other in the eye; they don't speak at the end of the service, and don't meet again until the following week. [In what ways are each of these church?](#)



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