

Building the Urban Parish

If there is one word that best describes the consequences of twentieth century urbanisation, it must be 'alienation'. Those caught up in it have become alienated from the soil, alienated from the home, alienated from the centres of power and alienated from the church. The church, with one or two exceptions, has never accommodated itself to the urban situation and yet it was in the urban situation that the early church recorded some distinctive successes. Nobody could be more 'alienated' than the vagrant in Rome, the docker in Corinth or the factory worker in Ephesus. Yet they, and others like them, came in from the cold and found warmth and fellowship in those early Christian communities. But they found more — a vision of cities transformed and people humanised by the power of the Gospel. There is a dream that in the thick of the life of our cities we can know right relationships between people and with God.

It is with this basic conviction that a minister launches out on a voyage of discovery. Armed with a call and a dream, he ventures into the unknown. As he seeks to serve in churches bent solely on survival, he must have a clear sense of direction in order to build his ministry. It is this and its working out that are the purposes of this article.

Our role in ministry is to build up the church. There are some who have the gifts of a pioneer evangelist, to bring the church into being under God, and there are places in the urban world where unreached people require such a ministry. But the majority of churches require the pastor/teacher who knows where he's going. And a large part of his vision is filled with the church God has called him to serve.

A Sense of Direction

A primary focus in God's plan and purpose for the world is the building of the church. It is the place where God's glory will be seen and His joy and love experienced (John 17:10, 13, 26). Not only did Jesus promise that He would build his church, but that the building was to take place on a worldwide scale and throughout every strata of society (Matthew 16:18, 28:19). So the task of the individual clergy in an urban parish is to build a church right there. Its locality may be defined, its sense of identification may be encouraged, its commitment to a neighbourhood becomes a legitimate concern and its life style adapted to match the local culture. We must be faithful and true to the historic Christian Faith and its setting within New Testament times, but our task is to interpret the Faith and its practice for our own times and in our own urban situation. What is the Gospel for the city dweller and what will the urban church look like?

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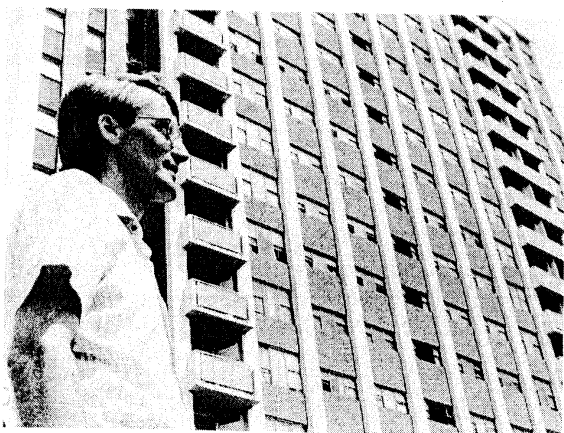
David Sheppard wrote "The Church which will make Jesus Christ and His claims a serious adult proposition will need to have at least four characteristics: a Church of and for the area, a believing and worshipping Church, a common life providing unjudging and thought-provoking fellowship and local leaders and decision makers". (Built as a City).

The Foundations for Ministry

Along with a sense of direction, the minister requires some essentials which will form him and his approach to ministry.

There is firstly the model of ministry. Close examination of Jesus' Commission to the disciples shows that preaching, converting and teaching have an important part to play.

But behind John's account of the Commission in John 20:21 lie two fundamentals that can often be overlooked. When Jesus, in his prayer-statement, commissioned His disciples, He said, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." The model of our ministry was to be precisely and deliberately the same as His. So to understand ours we must understand His. Some aspects of His ministry were clearly unique — He came to be the Saviour of the world and we are not saviours. But in a more general sense came to serve. His significant words in declaring Himself at Caesarea Philippi brought together two Old Testament pictures of the Messiah. "The Son of Man... came not to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45).



Geoff Huard and part of his "Patch"

Photo: Raymon Williams

Underlying the sacrifice of His own life was an attitude of service. "I am among you as one who serves", He asserted, and His words and deeds bore that out. He proclaimed the good news of the Kingdom of God, how it would come, what it would be like, how it could be entered and how it could be spread. His deeds were the teaching in practice. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, comforted the sad, washed dirty feet and brought dead back to life. So service must characterise the church's ministry too. A lack of concern about status, humility in mind and the appearance of service are the lessons Paul draws from the example of Christ's ministry (Phil. 2:5-11). How far removed the modern church has been when it has cultivated exclusive relationships with the wealthy and powerful, arrogantly asserted its rights and privileges and made selfish demands on society to maintain its position and influence.

The second quality about Jesus' ministry is that *in order to serve He came into the world*. He left behind His glory and limited Himself in time and space, in humanity and culture. He became one of us experiencing the full range of our weaknesses, temptations and sufferings. He came to where we are. And now He sends us too 'into the world'.

Just as He identified fully with us (yet without sinning) so we are to identify fully with those we serve (yet without losing our Christian identity). Here the principle of the Incarnation forms our ministry. John Stott writes "It comes more naturally to 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". (Christian Mission in the Modern World). But this is the place from which we can best influence. We begin to see life and experience the world from where they are. And it will be very different. As the Lausanne Covenant states: "We affirm that Christ sends his redeemed people into the world as the Father sent him, and that this calls for a similar deep and costly penetration of the world". Here then is the model of Jesus' ministry.

The second essential that forms us and our ministry in an urban parish is the biblical teaching on the church. The building of the church in urban areas is based on the rediscovery that the church is the people of God, on the move, gifted by God, a community of believers, close enough to be a family, experiencing the deep joy of God's new life, developing a common life marked by poverty, generosity and suffering, rather than wealth, selfishness or power.

If it is true that our cities today are marked by alienation, the results are seen in loneliness, insignificance, apathy, violence, hatred, suspicion, selfishness and despair. This is the very opposite of the community life planned for us by God — a life marked by love, unity and service as seen in the local church. The non-judgemental nature of the local church, a sort of 'Sinners Anonymous', needs to be asserted particularly. Bruce Kendrick writes in 'Come Out the Wilderness', — "Judgement seemed to be the traditional church's first word in East Harlem. It almost seemed as if the first concern was not to bring the lost sheep home, but to keep the lost

sheep out in case they impaired the church's reputation for respectability."

In South Sydney too, many of our neighbours expect the church to meet them in judgment, and to condemn them for not doing what they ought to do and for doing what they ought not.

The church emphasised as a family meets a deep need in urban communities. The breakdown in nuclear families, the dislocation of family support across the generations and the high incidence of single parent families means individuals are having to cope with complex problems they were never intended to bear single-handed. The extended family has gone. The church family should be there. Older members take an interest in the younger and feel valued as they offer support, advice, tell the stories of the past and pass on the traditions of the area. In some cases they play the role of grandparents and act as matriarchs in the christian community. Younger members have enthusiasm, energy, idealism, fresh ideas and they challenge again the presuppositions of the past. Both single and married find a place within the church's wider family as well as having others of their own age to associate with. The support and interest they give the elderly prevents loneliness and despair.

The third essential foundation to ministry is a belief in the importance and effectiveness of prayer. Wherever there are growing churches there are praying churches. The sustained commitment to personal and corporate prayer has often come because God has burdened people with their apathy, powerlessness and division. Yet in praying for renewal we need to see that God will frequently want to begin with us and that in doing something new He's not going to do a rerun of what's happened in the past. We need to be ready to be changed ourselves not just our situation or circumstances.

A Way Forward

The first steps in establishing urban ministry will include the need to make Christianity *visible*, and the minister's role here is that of an enabler. The mission of the church has frequently been misunderstood as simply the proclamation of the Gospel message, whereas the mission of Jesus included his acted parables and visible demonstrations of God's kingdom. In today's urban areas with its high population density and rapid population turnover, the church must achieve visibility. We are not to grab sensational headlines but contribute to the life of our community and respond to its needs. We shall seek to serve, expecting nothing in return as Jesus demonstrated and described by his self-giving love. Making the church's resources available to the community is one way of doing this. Whereas one church might restrict the use of its church bus to its own activities and refuse to let other community groups borrow it, another might transport local children to school, make it available to schools and community groups, and use it to replace the old people's community shopping bus when the original one breaks down or is driverless. The local church's resources can also be used to assist community projects and

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The second step will be the deliberate effort to *build bridges* of contact with the local community. How does the minister do this? For some this means living out our lives alongside others, shopping where they shop, sending our children to the local schools, finding ourselves disadvantaged by the same environment and lack of facilities. It requires a deliberate attempt to associate with our community and wear its suffering and disadvantage. Local church members along with all other Housing Commission tenants were deeply distressed at the Commission's decision to close local rent offices and bring in a computerised rent card system. The minister sponsored and publicised protest meetings, invited officials to attend and facilitated a delegation to meet the Government Minister responsible to press for changes. Here the powerless and voiceless felt the church was lending its weight to making sure their case was heard by decision makers.

On a personal level individual Christians become involved with others in meeting established needs. One example might be English teaching services to migrants. Another might be answering a local G.P.'s request to give someone some community support. Friendships thus begun become relationships and this is what life is really about for people. It is within these personal relationships that discoveries are made about new dimensions to living.

Underlying this principle is an acceptance of the culture of the community as neutral. Not 'better than' others, nor 'worse than' others, but just different. In inner urban areas things are done differently. A local mum gave a lottery ticket to say 'thank you' for taking her child to school. To have rejected it, because it was 'gambling', would have been offensive and totally misunderstood. 'Raffles' are accepted in the community as an accepted way of raising money and to refuse to buy a raffle ticket for a local cause smacks of sanctimonious superiority.

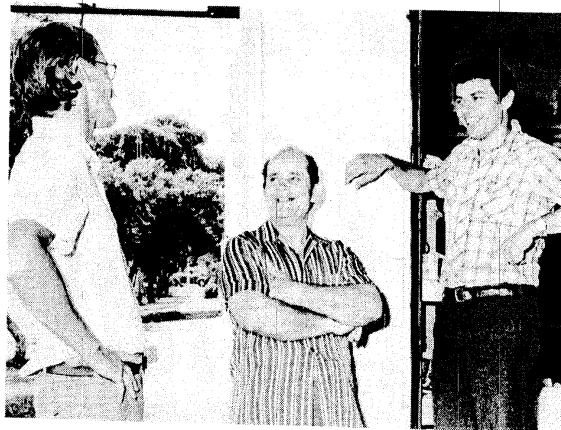
Also important is seeing the local church as very much part of the local community. The 'us' and 'them' mentality has been encouraged by an over-emphasis on separateness and purity from the world and taken up by those who see no place for Christianity in modern life. The desire to privatise the faith (so Os Guinness says in 'The Gravedigger File') leads to the exclusion of Christianity from everyday life. The barrier between 'sacred' and 'secular' is not biblical and must be dismantled. The local minister and his congregation will see themselves as very much part of the local community and allow themselves to be pastors to the whole community — not just those of their own denomination. Increasingly, denominational loyalty is becoming insignificant and irrelevant in the urban parish. The Christian community must take its rightful place in the market place, council chamber, community festival, protest meeting and Parents and Citizens Groups.

A third step must be the development of the local church into an attractive, enjoyable, thoughtful *worshipping family*. It needs time and

groups fulfilling their tasks. Frequently the church has some secretarial, management and financial skills which when offered to the community can make the difference between worthwhile, locally run projects getting government funding or going to the wall.

In addition to the church's calling to be invisible yeast and savouring salt, we are called to be a prominent light strategically placed to give maximum effect, as visible as a city built on a hill. It's not to be such as draws attention to itself for its own sake, but to be the shining out of God's light and life within it. Public events that the local church sets up, like annual fetes, market days and outdoor Christmas Carol Concerts, and community events like festivals and fiestas, will all demonstrate a different quality of life.

Spontaneous opportunities need to be seized in local disasters and personal tragedies. The church's preparedness to give practical support and offer assistance in various ways, gives enormous credibility to its message. When floods swept through Redfern homes and fires destroyed fifteen homes in Waterloo, local people appreciated the church's provision of transport to move household belongings, provide blankets and buy a packet of smokes. In fact we can say that people don't 'hear' our words, no matter how eloquently and relevantly proclaimed, unless they first 'see' our concern about the quality of life of all people. If we are building a community of hope and encouragement in a sea of alienation, its visible impact will be picked up all over the place.



Bridge building

Photo: Raymon Williams

effort to create the right balance between the givenness of the denomination's worship requirements and the local culture's expression of worship. The church is primarily a worshipping community, directing its worship towards the living God, containing the mutual building up of the body of Christ and totally dependant on the Holy Spirit. The style and colour of services need to be warm, human and welcoming. The contribution of church members can be in preparing the services, design and content of a local service book, active participation in the ministry of the Word and Sacraments and playing a vital role around the service. The local church member who regularly seeks out newcomers, sits with them to help them with the service, talks with them over a cup of tea and then introduces them to others plays a vital role in making outsiders feel this church is for them. The celebrations in the church family can cover individuals' birthdays as well as weddings, baptisms and funerals, and the occasions of the year. Bar-B-Q's at Easter, Christmas parties, picnics, housewarmings, week-ends away, all build up the common life of the local church. The being-together might well include the need to travel together and a permanent record by movie or video will enable the events to be relived on later occasions and stir the memories again.

Against the low esteem and low expectation of many in urban areas comes the recognition that all have been gifted by God and need encouragement to develop those gifts. 'Oh, I could never do that' is frequently heard as an excuse for not doing a Bible Reading, but in reality with a little personal confidence it can be the start of using gifts in the service of others. The small group has a valuable part to play in developing self-confidence and increasing self-esteem. Here ideas are shared, dreams and plans discussed and the support of others obtained.

In due course the signs appear that individuals, previously broken by physical or mental illness or presenting a front of shyness that is in reality a gross lack of self-esteem, can assert themselves to the point of taking the initiative and leading programmes. Timid self-effacing grown ups who walked down the street with head hung low for fear of catching someone's glance have been changed by the power of Christ and been given grace to be more assertive, learn new skills, organise new caring programmes and build up a team of co-workers. Elderly ladies who normally would keep to themselves begin visiting each other for coffee and meals and going shopping together. It all stems from the worshipping community that reaches out to include broken and damaged people.

The Minister's Role

There are now a number of matters that relate specifically to the way the minister goes about his work in an urban parish. Granted he is concerned for the church and is prepared to work for it to be all that God has for it, what specific matters will occupy him in an inner city parish?

The first concerns his *strategy for involving local people*. If the church is

committed to the area and its wellbeing, then he will want a handle on some workable method of involvement. Community Development is one such model, that comes in a variety of forms. It can be seen as the process by which local individuals and communities hitherto without power express their opinions about their community and seek to become involved in decision making. Powerlessness and dependence have gone hand in hand in perpetuating deprivation and disadvantage. Community Development looks at the root causes and affirms that too much dominant leadership from outside providing facilities for people has been detrimental. There is ability in every community.

Where broken people have little sense of personal expectation and no confidence in themselves and for years have been undervalued and told outright or obliquely that they are 'no good failures', then they need help to stand up and take confidence in their own abilities. By participating in small groups, self-help schemes or single issue action groups, the lost sense of involvement and belonging can be recovered. When human warmth and responsibility are stimulated in an area, people begin to feel good about themselves and the casualties decrease. When they express their understanding of their needs they begin to play a major role in leadership. Local leadership matures when it can ride disappointments and stand up to those who work purely for their own self interest.

Now if the minister follows this pattern he will not despair when people let him down and don't keep appointments or fulfil responsibilities. If he seeks to encourage them they'll not feel they can never face him again over their failure, but that they can try again. Any offer to contribute will be accepted and used to build up friendships, for example, the man who brings second hand clothes for the church to sell on Market Day. The second-hand furniture and cast-offs are collected and accepted because they're offered.

The professional worker and resource person has a real role to play but it is *behind the scenes* rather than out front. He can give the encouragement required to help people through to self-confidence. He can give continuing support when projects go through difficult times, help those involved assess their progress and achievement, ask questions, provide information and help people develop their own resources. But he doesn't work for people, he works with them. This model when used in local church growth has produced significant results where there has been a long term commitment by the minister. It all takes time and there are no short cuts.

The second concern is to *give decision making to members of the church*. Again it takes time for the laity to realise that the minister does not want the church life to revolve around him. The minister should say clearly that it is fine for them to take a lead, and decide what they can contribute. The whole church is gifted by God and all contribute to the ongoing life, witness and worship of the church. The minister may need to change his role considerably to that of supporting and encouraging the fledgling

leaders, rather than doing it all himself. It will take longer, maybe even become fiercely frustrating as people talk through the problems, and express themselves forcefully, but to genuinely give over decision making is to harness local ability and promote responsibility.

The third concern in an urban parish is to work hard at *personal relationships*. Relationships are vital in urban living and adults will think more about the Christian faith as a result of a relationship in which they catch a glimpse of the Christian life-style than if they are verbally assaulted by a hit-and-run Christian! So evangelism will work better in small groups and with individuals than at larger gatherings. There are also many lapsed and non-competing Christians in urban parishes. Some have dropped out of the more pressurised middle class success orientated Christian groups. From out of the woodwork there gradually appear those who have had some Christian background in times past. Their careful restoration to the Christian family needs to be handled gently and sensitively as their faith is renewed and their love rekindled. The power and attraction of caring relationships make a deep impression.

Conclusion

The dream then that in the thick of life in our urban areas we can know right relationships between people and with God can become reality. The minister's role is vital but the voyage of discovery contains some spectacular sights as lives are transformed and God's Kingdom becomes apparent among us.