FAITH IN THE CITY
Ten Years On

By ANTHONY DYSON

We are ministers and community workers in British Inner Cities and Urban Estates. We work in churches, community centres and projects.

We look back on the last decade:

– In the Nation, a decade of repeated and varied attempts to solve the problems of the Inner Cities, repeated schemes and laws which have affected the lives of our people.

– In the Churches, a decade of church-led programmes, such as the Methodist Mission Alongside the Poor (1983), and the Anglican Faith in the City (1985) and Church Urban Fund (1987).

Despite all this our experience of the cities is that:

– while small initiatives have been valuable and appreciated, they have not been able to combat a growing decline.

– things have got worse in many areas to which we wish to draw attention.

– new legislation has led to the greater disadvantage of those already disadvantaged.

We are therefore calling for a change. We want to see different policies which might lead to the liberation, flourishing and empowerment of all.[1]

To examine the strengths, insights, problems and needs of the Church's life and mission in Urban Priority Areas and, as a result, to reflect on the challenge which God may be making to Church and Nation: and to make recommendations to appropriate bodies.* (*'The term Urban Priority Areas is used to include inner city districts and many large Corporation estates and other areas of social deprivation.')[2]

THE PETITION FROM WHICH a portion is quoted above was published in 1993. The above terms of reference were given to the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas appointed in 1983. The Report of this Commission was published in 1985 with the title *Faith in the city: a call for action by Church and nation (FC)*. The Introduction to the Report began: 'A serious situation has developed in the major cities of this country'.[3] The Conclusion reads: 'We have found faith in the city'.[4]

The xvi + 398 pages of the Report contained, among other things: The Challenge . . . (Urban Priority Areas, Church and City, Theological Priorities); . . . To the Church (What Kind of Church, Organising

the Church, Developing the People of God, Supporting a Participating Church); . . . And the Nation (Urban Policy, Poverty Employment and Work, Housing, Health, Social Care and Community Work, Education and Young People, Order and Law); Conclusions and Recommendations.

Why was the structure of an Archbishop's Commission chosen? Alternatives could have been a wholly unofficial undertaking or a formal synodical commission. The unofficial undertaking might have generated little affirmation from the Church of England and the nation as a whole. The formal synodical commission might have been beset by bureaucracy and internal politics. The format of an Archbishop's Commission gave crucial freedom over membership, terms of reference, but perhaps also promised weakness in respect of follow-up. In the event, General Synod made a significant contribution to what came next.

The membership of the Commission was crucial. In *Christianity and social order*, William Temple had argued that the Church must pronounce only on principles. It was left to Christians as citizens, and to other citizens, not least by virtue of their expertise, to apply these broad principles. But Archbishop Runcie brought many of the experts onto the Commission. The Commissioners included Sir Richard O'Brien (who had become widely known for his leadership of the Manpower Services Commission) as Chairperson, Bishop David Sheppard, a black bishop, a vicar who was deputy leader of a city council, a senior trades union leader, professors of social policy, sociology and industrial economics, a theologian, and clergy and others living and/or working in UPAs. But the tiny presence of women could neither be understood nor excused. Among the advisers to the Commission was Canon Eric James of Christian Action. If the dogged initiative to bring into existence *Faith in the city* lay with one individual, it was with him.

We must presume that a good deal of thought and care was given to naming *FC* and that we are therefore intended to take the title seriously. 'Faith in the city' is of course a phrase of double meaning with a variety of other nuances, e.g., 'we should vest faith and confidence in the UPAs; faith, of a humanisic and religous kind, can be found in the UPAs'. The sub-title 'a call for action by Church and nation' focuses sharply upon 'action'. Obviously, actions have to be grounded in understanding. But the Report is primarily an 'appeal' not a textbook. Nor is the mode simply introspective: it is an appeal to Church *and* nation. Nor is it a sectional appeal just to government, to political parties, to particular religious groups, and so on. Rather it is a call to the corporate nation; the task requires and demands a corporate response. The purpose of *Faith in*

the city is, primarily, to 'stir up' Church and nation and to remind them of their responsibilities.

FC has been criticized in many respects, two in particular. The first gravamen concerns the 'theology' of the Report, especially Chapter 3. The charge was widely made that this chapter failed to lay out an appropriate theological method and content for the task relating to the UPAs. Undoubtedly Chapter 3 is lacking in coherence and tries to say too many things. But it is quite clear in one respect. The rhetorical question is asked: 'Can we not offer a "theology of the city" which will serve as a guide and inspiration to those who work in Urban Priority Areas?'[5] *FC*'s answer to its own question is, in effect, no and yes. The responses made to the common factors of the crises of our cities show an amazing 'variety'. So 'it would be highly misleading if we were to propose a "theology of the city" that claimed to be appropriate to such a variety of situations. An authentic theology can arise only as a response to each particular circumstance.' But if the answer to the question is thus far 'no', there is also a 'yes' in para 3.45, which is more a religious confession than a theological statement, and which serves to point out, in a thoroughly positive way, the broad framework of Christian belief within which the 'theologies [plural] of the cities [plural]' generally belong.

At the end of the last paragraph, the word 'theology' was used in the plural. This possibility of a pluralism of theologies is explored in *Theology in the city*.[6] In this book it is the chapter by the editor entitled 'Introduction: an alternative theology?' and that by Andrew Kirk entitled 'A different task: liberation theology and local theologies' which do most to understand and expound what *FC* has to say about theology. Harvey argues that it is becoming increasingly recognized that a diversity of forms of expression of Christian truth, far from being sinful and temporary, is in fact inherent in the Christian religion. Thus it is possible to make out a case for the validity of a 'local theology' that is different in style and content from the inherited intellectual discipline but that is still known as 'theology'. One of the major consequences of this shift of perspective about theology is mentioned by Kirk when he writes that the liberation perspective in Latin America would express itself in the emergence of 'local theologies'.[7] But *FC* also entertains similar expectations. The Church should give 'every encouragement to the growth of theologies that are authentic expressions of local cultures'.[8] This discussion of theology in *FC* is important for the whole venture; it is important for the various spiritualities of the UPAs; it is important also because the Western pursuit of theology 'operates as the *power of knowledge over people*',

while theological reflection from the Third World 'seeks to release the power of God's people from within Christian communities to be agents of transformation'.[9]

Now it is time to consider the political outlook of the Report. This can begin by reference to Raymond Plant's criticism of its inadequacies. '*Faith in the city* is . . . an invitation to think theologically about some of the fundamental political realities of our own day, and the different values which underlie those realities.'[10] Plant's argument is presented as a critique of the New Right. It is against that tendency that he explores the meaning of social justice which is compatible with Christian values. Thus: 'there is a long Christian tradition . . . which firmly rejects the amassing of wealth unless it is justly obtained and fairly distributed'.[11] So, for *Faith in the city* the 'worst-off members of society have a right based in justice for some rectification of their condition'.[12] The New Right denies this. But, Plant argues, it is not enough for *FC* to state positions on values, freedom and justice; it is necessary to think them through in the light of the challenge from the New Right. Be this as it may, Plant underlines one of the key conclusions which can be derived from the Anglican social tradition, namely that 'the State should foster the sort of institutions and groups in which power and responsibility can be shared and the seeking of the common good can be entered into at every level of society'.[13]

Behind the proposals for public policy in the UPAs set out in *FC* was the 1977 White Paper (government proposals) 'Policy for the Inner Cities'. 'We agree with the White Paper's analysis, and with the proposals it contained. But the stark fact is that there has been no sustained effort to put those proposals into effect.' The 'public policy response is clearly open to the charge of being inadequate and superficial'.[14] It comes as no surprise, therefore, that in the case of the seven sectors of the UPAs, most of the recommendations relate to the injection of direct or indirect money under one rubric or another. But there is also a plea for other kinds of investment, for example, 'the concept of partnership in the UPAs'.[15]

Some critics accused the Commission of simply wanting to throw money at intractable problems. It can of course be admitted that some of these proposals were mistaken. But it would require careful argument to try and settle on better ways forward; vituperation is inadequate. The Commission was aware that it was not in business to do the detailed work which would take experts and advisers years to achieve. Perhaps some of the recommendations were essentially illustrative. But clearly the Commission, over its period of work, was more and more grasped by what its members saw and pondered.

> Chapter after chapter of our Report tells the same story: that a growing number of people are excluded by poverty or powerlessness from sharing in the common life of our nation. A substantial minority – perhaps as many as one person in every four or five across the nation, and a much higher proportion in the UPAs – are forced to live on the margins of poverty or below the threshold of an acceptable standard of living.
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> Perhaps the most important wider question concerns the structure of our society . . . The critical issue to be faced is whether there is any serious political will to set in motion a process which will enable those who are at present in poverty and powerless to rejoin the life of the nation.[16]

What other steps were taken which prolonged and developed *FC* in the Church? Only the briefest indications can be given. Some dioceses followed up *FC* by doing a mini *FC*. An example was Birmingham.[17] UPA parishes were designated. The 'Audit for the Local Church' was taken up. The Church Urban Fund was established. 1990 saw the publication of *Living faith in the city*.[18]

The *Methodist mission alongside the poor* programme, hereafter *MAPP*, has had much in common, seemingly, with *FC*. A critical evaluation of the former has been undertaken by Niall Cooper and published under the title *All mapped out?*[19] Two points of comparison seem worthy of attention – what the original overall vision was and what became of it, and the fund-raising of *MAPP* compared with the Church Urban Fund.

Cooper argues that *MAPP* was in large part a response on the part of the institutional Church to the impassioned calls of practitioners who were facing in their everyday ministries the impact of the growing rich–poor divide in the early 1980s. So Cooper asks how the Church as an institution responds in these circumstances, how 'programmatic' responses such as *MAPP* emerge, under what constraints they operate, what the thinking behind them was, and what relationship this had with what happened in practice.

The immediate stimulus came at the 1980 Methodist Conference at which a 'Call to Home Mission' was proposed. The key words were the 'poor', 'social inequality', 'injustice', 'new resources' and 'mission'. At Conference in 1981 were added the words 'to implement structurally and financially the whole Church's commitment to *mission alongside the poor*'.[20] The above italicized phrase was never defined. Cooper comments:

> By the time the Programme was established in 1983, the whole focus had moved from a *political* concern to explore the causes of the growing

> divide between rich and poor, to a *pastoral* concern to be alongside those who were suffering as a consequence.[21]

By 1985 it became clear that the Committee was becoming too focused on the raising and distribution of funds, whereas its original intention had been more far-reaching. One significant feature in this debate was the 'deep divisions in Methodism with respect to *analyses of the causes of poverty*, and the extent to which Methodism should *engage politically* in the struggle for justice alongside the poor'.[22]

How did Cooper evaluate *MAPP?* The original intentions, in retrospect, seem radical, comprehensive and bold. It was not only the growing divisions in British society, marked by unemployment, racism, poverty, social unrest and so on, which demanded a Christian response. It was also felt that the Church too was divided and that this 'put the very credibility of the Gospel on the line'. So the question had to be put. '*How far has the Mission Alongside the Poor succeeded in altering the priorities, perceptions and relationship of the Church as a whole towards the poor and powerless?*'[23] The expectation of those most closely involved was that the Mission would embrace evangelism, social caring and the struggle for justice. The last of these, at least, would 'involve a political engagement'. But, according to Cooper, *MAPP* increasingly became *seen* as a *programme* which had the purpose of raising money Connexionally to 'make possible the employment of additional personnel and new programmes which will make possible a significant development in mission alongside the poor'.[24]

More precisely, in the main this has involved giving grants *to local church-sponsored projects* in non-suburban areas. Whether those now the most intimately involved with *MAPP* perceive the Programme as having other goals is not clear to Cooper. Clearly there are notable achievements, not least the near to 200 initiatives financially assisted (at the time of Cooper's writing). But, Cooper asks, has *MAPP* done enough to support projects in non-financial modes? That question can, in turn, be answered in two ways. First, *MAPP* has suffered from inadequate central resourcing which has largely confined the activity to administering the fund. Also a watchful eye has had to be directed at the Methodist Connexion which could respond negatively to too radical an initiative. Second, in practice, *any* type of 'community' or 'outreach' work has been funded by the Programme. To establish criteria for judging the success of the projects is therefore difficult, because one is thrown back on the need for an account of what is meant by 'mission alongside the poor' – and that has not been forthcoming in any unified kind of way.

But, in a sense, these questions had become academic after 1984 when the statement was made that 'the primary function of the Mission

Alongside the Poor Committee was to deal with applications [for grants] and to support the Home Mission Division in providing educational materials and raising money'.[25] By those criteria *MAPP* had done well in the decade 1983–1993, funding 240 projects, and spending £2.5m.

FC favoured the historic resources of the Church of England being re-allocated more equitably. But, in any case the Church of England has *no financial mechanism or legal power specifically to target financial assistance to the UPAs*. So, 'enormously encouraged' by *MAPP*, the setting-up of a Church Urban Fund was recommended and implemented, 'designed to generate £4m a year'. 'Explicit priority' should be given,

> to strengthening the Church's presence, and promoting the Christian witness, in the UPAs in ways which meet local needs and opportunities, which may be innovatory or experimental, and which are, whenever possible, undertaken with ecumenical consultation'.[26]

By 1989 £12m had been raised.

Clearly, the Church Urban Fund is only one element in *FC*, but it is a highly symbolic one. There has been the danger that it might prove to be a cosmetic exercise whereby people could 'subscribe their donations but avoid facing the hard "justice" questions posed by *Faith in the city*'.[27]

A difficult question has been the delineation and implementation of projects. A number of options present themselves. Payment could be made from the Fund to relieve immediate pressure by, for example, paying an additional salary, or by enabling the employment of specialists for a limited tenure post. Or money could be made available to carry out structural work on church property to adapt it for a wider usefulness. Similar developments could be undertaken for community-based ventures. There is justification for all these and others too. There is no justification for well-heeled parishes attempting to jump on the Church Urban Fund bandwagon to join in the race for spoils. But, as the concluding part of this essay will suggest, the selection of donees must be congruous with the meaning of 'faith in the city'. It is a question of discerning the kind of projects which symbolize the not always visible invasion of the immanent by the transcendent. To proceed in this manner is to court danger, failure and risk. That kind of involvement would indicate the need for spirited and spiritful support.

What is the bearing for the theme of *spirituality* of all that has been written so far in this essay? The word 'spirituality' is put to a variety of uses. Here it is taken to mean 'actualized faith'.

The Commission's work was patchy in planning, patchy in the Report and patchy in follow-up. It almost seemed that the Anglican powers-

that-be were surprised at the impact achieved by *FC*. Part of that impact was caused by the unintended publicity given to the project by senior members of the Government, and others, who had undoubtedly been touched on a raw nerve. Be that as it may, there was the impression of a structure for follow-up being hastily put together. The diocesan follow-up was also patchy in exploring and initiating financial support, in encouraging parish commitment, and in commending ecumenical co-responsibility. (Willmer refers to *FC* and 'its sadly too exclusively Anglican outcomes'.)[28] So, inevitably, the implications for spirituality were patchy also.

The political dimensions of *FC* spirituality were obscure. Hidden away is the observation that market capitalism and bureaucratic socialism were equally to be rejected. (This is a reminder, forty years on, of the approach to the concept of the 'responsible society' defined by the World Council of Churches.) Did this imply a deliberately pragmatic approach because the Commissioners were uneasy with political theory? '*Faith in the city* is rooted in the traditions of pragmatic social science, which provided the intellectual backbone of the post-1945 consensus.'[29] Was the middle ground being occupied so as not to alienate potential supporters, or did the Commission directly intend to put forward a positive alternative to the capitalism and the socialism mentioned above? If so, it was very silent about it.

All in all, the auguries for the fashioning of a UPA spirituality seemed far from favourable. But this was not altogether the case. There are signs of a positive view emerging from the triad 'local, outward-looking and participating'.

'Local' contrasts with 'universal' and with terms designating 'intermediacy'. It emphasizes that spirituality is, or ought to be, to a great extent shaped and nourished by the specificities of the 'local'. And here belongs the concept of a local theology alluded to at the beginning of this essay. To this, there belongs too the question of worship within the localness of the UPA, recognizing that if such worship is truly to engage the hearts and minds of urban people it must 'emerge out of and reflect local cultures'.[30] Also bearing directly upon the question of spirituality in the UPA is the pressure of the present structures of the Church which sometimes reflect not a liberative gospel but structures of power and control.

'Outward-looking' refers to the stance and attitude of the Christian community, preferably in ecumenical association, in the UPA. But it is *also* applied to the stance of non-UPA Christian communities *towards* the UPA. Outward-lookingness addresses itself to the themes of the second

half of *FC*: namely poverty, employment and work; housing; health; social care and community work; education and young people; and order and law.

It is also a participating spirituality. The philosophy and the politics of individualism have bitten deeply into the self-consciousness of the West and they are to be encountered, in microcosm, in the Christian and secular localities. The alternative to be sought lies in the *interdependence* which should characterize local theology, local worship, and which should also express itself in the interdependence which arises in the pluralism of local communities.

This essay cannot conceivably end on an upbeat note about the possibilities of spirituality either inside or outside the UPA. Today, ten years on, writing *Faith in the city* again would, in many respects, involve more not less pessimism about the future of the UPAs and about the capacity of the Churches to address themselves to this future. Writing with sobriety and realism in *City Wide*, the [glossy] 'magazine that goes to the heart of Britain's cities', Kenneth Leech concludes:

> The despair and the anger in some communities – and it will spread – may make for a more forceful response from people who have nothing to lose. The question for the church then will be about taking sides. The spirituality which is needed for that eventuality will not exactly be a source of consolation.[31]

Leech's remarks – and he does not pull his punches – point to a yet more fundamental issue. If, as Leech is hinting, the UPA church goes more or less independent, the rest of the Church of England will be deprived of the hard lessons which can and ought to be learnt from *Faith in the city*. Such lessons are not lessons just about the UPAs; rather they are lessons about the non-UPA portion of the Church of England. It is not possible to develop here the argument to justify this statement. But it would include reasoning towards the conclusion that the UPAs are different, for the most part, in degree rather than in kind, from the non-UPA portion. To employ a rather harsh image, it is as if the non-UPA portion hides and suppresses its problems and symptoms, whereas in the UPAs it is like a medical illustration with the internal organs open to view. The UPAs seem, on the surface, to have problems very different from those of the non-UPAs. At one level this is true. But when we probe to further levels of analysis, there are signs of a commonality of distress, though mediated in different ways.

One of the hopes of *FC* was that UPA and non-UPA parishes should 'twin' and thereby get to know each other. Anecdotal evidence suggests

that success in this kind of project has been very limited. It would be natural if the UPA congregations felt patronized by their big and apparently flourishing twin parishes. On the other hand, it is not difficult to imagine that the non-UPA parishes would feel embarrassed by the 'plight' of some of *their* twins and, in a well-meaning but fumbling manner, try to employ charity. When, however, we turn to the question of spirituality as discussed above, it is the case in UPAs and non-UPAs alike that this spirituality must 'emerge out of and reflect local cultures'. It is as non-UPA parishes come to grips with the analysis of their cultures – and they should do that with the participation of their brothers and sisters in the UPAs – that we become able to distinguish which problems *are* different in degree or in kind. At that point the UPA and the non-UPA can begin to dialogue.

In conclusion, a consideration is presented which points to the future. First, the recent massive dip in the financial fortunes of the Church of England, as administered by the Church Commissioners, points to the necessity for belts to be tightened. Will the UPAs be the first to suffer from this 'crisis'? Will some non-UPA parishes see to the servicing of their own needs of staffing and plant and will they give far less money to the 'centre'? Will we have a two-tier Church of England similar in structure and composition to what some believe will happen to, or has already happened to, the national health-care provision?

For the problems will not go away on their own impulse. It is expected that by the end of this century eighty per cent of the world's population will be city-dwellers. The small voice of *FC* has spoken with a fair amount of information and passion. It makes a plea that we should not let the matter drift until we have been overtaken by an avalanche of problems of gargantuan proportions.

NOTES

[1] John Vincent (ed), 'A petition of distress from the cities', *New City* No 19 (April 1993).
[2] *Faith in the city: a call for action by Church and nation: the Report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas* (London: Church House Publishing, 1985), p iii. Hereafter cited as *FC*.
[3] *FC*, p xiii.
[4] *FC*, p 360.
[5] *FC*, para 3.44.
[6] Anthony Harvey (ed), *Theology in the city: a theological response to 'Faith in the city'* (London: SPCK, 1989). Hereafter cited as *TC*.
[7] *TC*, p 23.
[8] *FC*, para 3.36.
[9] *TC*, p 19 (my italics).
[10] *TC*, p 69.

[11] *FC*, para 3.13.
[12] *TC*, p 72.
[13] *TC*, p 95.
[14] *FC*, paras 8.19f.
[15] *FC*, p 194.
[16] *FC*, paras 15.1, 6.
[17] *Faith in the City of Birmingham: an examination of problems and opportunities facing a city: the report of a commission set up by the Bishop's Council of the Diocese of Birmingham* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1988).
[18] *Living faith in the city: a progress report by the Archbishop of Canterbury's advisory group on urban priority areas* (*LFC*) (London: General Synod of the Church of England, 1990).
[19] As Occasional paper, no 22, 1992, of the William Temple Foundation, Manchester.
[20] Cooper, p 15.
[21] Cooper, p 18.
[22] Cooper, p 23.
[23] Cooper, p 39.
[24] Cooper, p 40.
[25] Cooper, p 20.
[26] *FC*, pp 162f.
[27] *LFC*, p 64.
[28] Willmer in *TC*, p 33.
[29] *LFC*, p 17.
[30] See note 6 above.
[31] *City Wide* (April 1993), p 32.