

AN INNER-CITY LEARNING COMMUNITY

By JOHN J. VINCENT

THE ARGUMENT OF THIS ARTICLE is that since the gospel was addressed primarily to outcasts, the communities involved with the struggles of the marginalized can be powerful centres of Christian learning.

Inner city as a context for learning

My place of ministry for 26 years has been inner-city Sheffield. Inner city means what it means anywhere in the western world – the areas around the decayed or disappeared metropolitan industrial areas, where poor whites who lack money to get out live alongside large groups of 1960–1980 immigrant families in areas of poor housing, decaying public facilities, and social, economic and health deprivation, the victims of government and local authority neglect and constant policy change.

Half a mile away from where I live is the Pye Bank area, the most deprived area of Sheffield. Pye Bank lies less than one mile to the north of the city centre. The area contains a mixture of two-storey houses, maisonettes and high-rise flats built during the 1960s. Over 85 per cent of households are in accommodation provided by the local council. 81 per cent of dwellings are flats and 19 per cent houses. Of the 2,523 people who live there, 1,917 are white, 454 are black, 152 are other ethnic groups. 61 per cent are in receipt of income support. 41 per cent are unemployed. 46 per cent are single-parent families. 82 per cent of all families with children have no wage-earners. 84 per cent have no access to a car. Even the 24 per cent of the potential workforce which is in employment is largely in low-paid, predominantly service-sector employment.

Recent government policy has added to its financial neglect by social victimization. Alongside the many single parents, unemployed, old people and disabled, the state is now inserting its 'community care' disabled and vulnerable. Neighbourhoods which already are at breaking point now additionally have to be the local communities which, on behalf of suburban tax-payers, have to 'care for' the nation's unfortunates and health risks. Meanwhile, hospital beds are taken for more specialist work, much of it 'private health care' for the rich.

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The schools in the inner cities are often in crisis. In one Sheffield secondary school in our area, two-thirds black or Asian, with a high proportion of parents unemployed, one of the teachers comments:

Litter is everywhere, cigarette ends and condoms in the toilets, boys in girls' toilets and vice versa. Recently a teacher has been beaten up by a boy *in the staff-room*. More than once teachers have been reported by children for alleged violence, when without doubt there was none, so sensitive is that issue. I know of no teachers who now enjoy their work. All come with a sense of disillusion, even dread, many with hatred of what they have to endure. Few now have the energy to initiate extramural activities. In all this, everyone suffers, not least the good, able, hopeful children who have little chance of the rich, uninterrupted education we all cherish for our children.

The situation on my doorstep in the inner city is becoming the experience of growing sections of British society. In his book *The state we're in*, Will Hutton lists some of the features of the British economy as 'high unemployment, the growth of inequality, the attempt to reduce the role of the state through privatisation and spending cuts, the containment of the welfare state, the sharp increase in imports, the falling proportion of manufacturing output'.¹ What is significant is that each one of these features especially produces deprivation, unemployment, loss of relative wealth, and drastic reduction in living standards in specific groups of people. And those people live generally in the cities and small, formerly industrial towns. They are the urban poor.

Meantime, the moral forces of Britain are in total disarray. The traditional institutions which regulated behaviour, set standards and rewarded goodness are all but shattered. Education, public services, health, transport, participation in government – all are now no longer common areas of our experience. All are now determined almost totally by the demonic power of money. If you have money, you participate in each of them. If you have no money, you hardly participate at all.

Meantime, religious forces sound uncertain notes. Locally, some of us work hard at street-level or community-level common endeavour or local issues. 'Inter-faith dialogue' is often a more middle-class phenomenon, but working with neighbours is a local reality, at least when local crises occur. Nationally there is no voice for this. When the Department of the Environment in 1990 set up its Inner Cities Religious Council, it was an attempt to get Christian and other faith representatives to try to do something about the declining conditions of

the inner cities. During the emergence of the crisis in the cities, Christian forces have often been preoccupied with internal matters. The churches have grown further apart, each denomination pursuing its own agenda. The growth points are outside the main denominations, in the Pentecostal and black churches and the house churches, many of them in inner-city areas. The main-line denominations in 1989 formed the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland. The old activist social-gospel British Council of Churches, working hand in hand with the World Council of Churches, was replaced by a body in which the denominational leaders, especially of the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England, would have more influence. The result, I believe, is less radicalism and less politics – but also less relevance, and an all but total co-option of the forces of education into power-sharing with the élite. In my experience, many denominational schools have closed in our inner city – symptomatic of the churches' compliance with current perceptions of what is worth doing and what is not worth doing.

The Urban Theology Unit (UTU)

Nevertheless, some Christians have created new alliances in the inner cities. Our own Sheffield Inner City Ecumenical Mission (SICEM) has six denominational neighbourhood churches with congregations in various deprived areas, plus three ecumenical projects. The Urban Theology Unit is a unit in the Mission. Each church is a centre for a small group of highly committed local people. There are nine old people's lunch clubs, three youth clubs, three children's clubs, plus various other ministries. We run two community buses, with a Community Work Co-ordinator supervising much of the work. In 1994, two women started work as Families' and Children's workers in two of our areas based on two of the churches. In 1996, we bought a redundant public house, The Furnival, where a Baptist woman minister now pioneers an 'open house' in the Pye Bank area which I described. The minister, Rev. Jane Grinonneau, is also a part-time UTU Core Staff member, as also is Sister Una Burke LSU, who lives with a colleague in a community house in the same Pye Bank Area.

In the midst of all this, the Urban Theology Unit operates from four large Edwardian houses on a pleasant inner-city street – which is still the eighteenth area of poverty out of 360 areas of Sheffield. UTU is a theological education and research centre which has its base in SICEM. Sheffield University now accredits BMin, MMin, DMin, MPhil and PhD degrees for work done at UTU. But UTU's preoccupation is defined in its 1994 Mission Statement, which reads:

UTU seeks to be an Association of Christians from all denominations committed to the search for relevant Christian discipleship in the city, working through its members in many places, sharing their gifts, insights and experiments. UTU also seeks to be a Community of Study and Commitment, based in the inner city, where people from many backgrounds, nationalities and traditions, can come for vocational discovery and theological and ministerial education.

UTU's agenda is 'bottom up'. All UTU staff are inner-city ministers and workers and serve UTU part time. There is a core staff of eight, nearly all part time, with twenty other 'spare-time' tutors. Currently the denominational mix of the core staff is: three Methodist, two Roman Catholic, one Anglican, one United Reformed Church, one Baptist.

We declare our commitment as:

- Searching for radical Christian Discipleship and Vocation in the City
- Advancing the theological and ministerial potential of every Christian
- Seeking the empowerment of the poor and powerless and their participation in their liberation
- Proclaiming and living the radical Gospel of the Kingdom of God.

In practice, this finds us:

- Encouraging styles, strategies and spiritualities which are effective for mission in urban settings
- Generating new and alternative forms of Church life and projects appropriate to the marginalized in 'fourth world' Britain
- Promoting Biblical and Theological motivation for practical ministry and community work
- Campaigning for justice for the urban poor, and for wholeness in the human city.

Our method is to be a 'Seminary of the Street', which invites people of all ages and interests to come and share in its 'Community of Study', either by coming to live in our pleasant but modest inner-city location, becoming involved in local community work; or by making use of their own ministry or vocational context. UTU provides a seed-bed for personal formation, gospel and theological discovery and mission discernment, plus a degree if you wish. Inner-city or urban priests, ministers, religious and lay people come from many places for short periods over two or three years. Others come for sabbaticals, study weeks or the July Institutes on Socio-Biblical Studies, Urban Theology, British Black Theology or British Liberation Theology.

Three basic presuppositions or assumptions underlie our work. First, learning is taking place all the time. Learning does not start when we decide to put a person in a situation where they are supposed to be learning. All people, children, youth, parents, professionals, let alone disciples among each group, learn most by assimilation, initiation and the acceptances and rejections which come from peers. Thus, learning is achieved primarily by the assimilation of context and experience-within-context.

Second, learning takes place best where experienced realities are expanded or fulfilled or critiqued by book learning. The methods of Bible study which I associate with terms like those of Snaps/Studies/Spinoffs, People's Bible Study, or Imaginative Identification (see *Mark at work*²) are all methods whereby a person today with their own vocation, mission and experience 'gets into' Bible passages and learns from them in an experiential-dialogical encounter. Such methods are also useful in dealing with literature other than scripture.

Third, learning flourishes and grows when the imagination is kindled by the introduction of contrary and initially irreconcilable exposures and encounters. These may be with new situations, or with new people, or with new practices, or with new books, or with new continued situations (role plays).

The conclusion is obvious: if you want to change a person's learning, you either change their context, or, if you cannot change their context, then produce contrary experiences within the context which will lead to growth. The experiences offered at the Urban Theology Unit fall into one or other of these broad areas. Probably the most instructive course for our purposes is the Study Year.

A year for conversion

The Study Year is based on the conviction that people whose background has been in an educational straight-jacket of school or university or professional training need the experience of contrary contexts, values and people. We describe the purpose of the year as 'a time for reflection on past experiences, opening up to new experiences, opportunities and insights, and projecting future vocation'. A variety of people join the Study Year, from very varied backgrounds, nationalities, denominations. So, the first thing we do with someone coming for our Study Year is to ask them what they want. Often, they say 'Anything different from what I have had so far'.

The pattern of the year is that people do community work of various kinds, then on Wednesdays and Thursdays they study four basic, on-

going areas: Personal Theology and Mission, Applied Bible Studies, Contemporary Theologies and Urban Ministry. The key course is the ten two-day sessions on Personal Theology and Mission, when we work with each person on the way they have come, how they derived the ideas they have, and then go into our methods and models of Bible, Theology and Christian Experience whereby they can move towards the creation or re-creation of their theology, vocation and mission.

Residence is available in one or other of the four UTU houses, or in accommodation in the Grimesthorpe Church flat or the Ashram Community Houses, which are all associated, as is UTU itself, with the Sheffield Inner City Ecumenical Mission.

The experience of the Study Year has proved decisive for many people. People who already have professions – as planners, doctors, teachers, nurses – have found it salutary to experience for a period the situation of those in need and to whom they will be ministering as professionals. People who are uncertain of their personal vocation and mission have valued the time of exposure to the multitude of needs in the urban environment, in which the calls of those in need may be heard. People searching intentionally for their futures have found their questions reformulated. In one period, three men thinking of becoming ordained, separately and unconnectedly decided to train as nurses. In another period, several women decided whether or not to proceed to ordination to ministry. A number of people who came in their mid-twenties found their homes in the inner city and have found voluntary, part-time or occasionally full-time work there, and have settled in inner-city locations.

The great value of UTU and the inner-city location for learning is that they prove salutary ways to question all the assumptions and presuppositions of mainstream society for which the normal learning environment merely provides sophisticated side comments. Thus far, UTU has probably been best as a change and conversion agent to the middle class. The middle-class schools, universities and churches still produce frustrated radicals who need a place to be and to grow, and UTU probably is best at serving them, with the learning community as contextual conscientization/conversion process.

Looking at the Study Year graduates over almost 25 years, one would have to conclude that the lifestyles, ministries and residential commitments of several hundreds of people have been affected in a more or less permanent way. Many continue to sustain commitments in alternative Christian communities, or spend time in projects and houses connected with the Iona, Corrymeela or Ashram communities, several

also with the Jesuit Volunteer Community, and now the Ashram Community Volunteers.

Into this group also come numbers of people from deprived neighbourhoods and poor circumstances. They use UTU as a way of discovering skills and insights for their own lives and situations. There has been a steady but modest stream of people from Afro-Caribbean communities, or from small local churches, plus some with personal problems of various kinds, who have found the UTU experience to be one in which personal discovery and growth opens up abilities and learning possibilities which had previously seemed quite out of the question.

Those of this group who have attended the Study Year quite often return to or continue in their previous home community and environment. Usually they develop new forms of ministry and discipleship, either within their churches or in the wider community, where they might become involved in community development, community action, or community service. Sometimes, they move into specific forms of ministry, either lay or ordained, carried out in spare time or as part-time or full-time ministry.

It has also been our policy to encourage priests, religious, ministers and other professional or lay church workers to become part of this learning community. Our experience is that the mutual learning is enormous. The three groups – middle-class people undergoing conscientization/conversion, poorer urban people undergoing processes of discovery, and religious people undergoing sabbaticals, ‘retreats’, ‘refits’ or ‘regeneration’ – create an environment of mutual support and mutual learning in which major personal moves and changes are natural and significant.

This localized and small yearly experience of the Study Year exists alongside and related to efforts to bring the wider society into experiences of learning from urban realities. Here UTU attempts to be a ‘mouthpiece’.

A mouthpiece for the poor

UTU has pioneered many attempts to speak nationally on the crisis in the cities. In 1993, the Methodist Church and UTU delivered the ‘Petition of Distress from the Cities’³ to the Queen, which gained much public discussion and some (fruitless) debates with the Department of the Environment in London and the government-appointed Inner Cities Religious Council.

1995 was the tenth anniversary of the important Anglican report, *Faith in the city*. The report itself drew much debate from government

as well as stimulating a decade-long programme within the churches. Ten years further on, that work needed to be repeated. Consequently the Methodist Conference of 1994 requested UTU with NCH Action for Children and the Public Affairs and Home Mission Offices of the Methodist Church to work on a new report on the cities. That report was launched in the House of Commons on 5 March 1997.⁴

In writing the report, we discovered that there were many wider issues posed by the crisis in the cities which are fundamental to our whole way of life. We need to look again at the lessons of the Church of England's report, *Faith in the city*, unquestionably the most important report to be published in the UK by the Church this century. Detailed stories from inner-city, urban housing areas and other deprived areas need to be told again, ten years on. Where are we now in the cities? What can be learnt from past mistakes and tragedies? And what does this all say about the nation as a whole?

One point we constantly returned to was that we need not only new wide-ranging ideas but also new small, local embodiments. The decisive contributions to making life more human with which I have been concerned have all been concerned with bottom-up, people-led movements. We need lower-level aggregations of people, where people who perceive a common interest with their neighbours set about acting together for the common good. We need levels of belonging, places where we 'plug in' to reality, acceptance and solidarity. We need self-sufficient, mutually supportive, local villages in the city. If they could work, they could be another way of keeping decisive people away from the largely finance-producing centres of power and influence. Perhaps what we need above all is a notion of vocation, seen in community, economic, social and cultural spheres. Can we become entrepreneurial again for the common good? In religious terms, local community religion needs to exist alongside civil religion. The much condemned sect is probably better in practice at such projects than the established churches. In the Sheffield Inner City Ecumenical Mission all the member units are very small congregations, neighbourhood based, sometimes in a corner shop, house or pub, with support from small local community houses related to the neighbourhood churches. They could be models for the new multiple community groups of the future city.

I am convinced that Christians especially must try to listen to our sisters and brothers in inner-city and urban congregations. A different good news is at work there, which cannot be identified with the self-salvation, success-blessing, personal-improvement, family-values,

consumer-led good news of many churches elsewhere in different social and cultural contexts.

The stories of Jesus in the gospels are heard in a quite different way in small, poor, urban and inner-city churches. There, they are seen to describe and support an alternative good news. This is the good news of community salvation, blessings from the poor, neighbourhood activism, humanistic values and the survival ethos of the urban churches. A recent UTU study booklet, *Good news in Britain*,⁵ tells such urban stories beside some gospel stories. The annual series, *British liberation theology*, in its first volume contains the theory of urban liberation theological practice,⁶ and its second celebrates 'Faith from the city'.⁷

The most obvious new learning of this kind is experienced not in UTU itself but in our local SICEM churches. The neighbourhood people who worship in our local Christian communities in the Grimesthorpe shop, The Furnival pub, or the old Wincobank chapel are base Christian community congregations. Each would number ten or so adults at a typical Sunday service. Usually we sit around in a circle, or semi-circle. The sharing of joys and concerns is a central element, often taking ten minutes, with children joining in the spontaneous prayers for people or needs.

Often the sermon is based on a story from the gospels. The story itself may be read round, with everyone reading a verse. The sermon will begin from the gospel story – everyone has a Bible in their hand. The preacher will briefly retell the story and point out elements in the text. Often people laugh or interrupt to ask questions, or even burst in with a story of their own which seems to them to be like the story in the gospels. The preacher needs some subtlety to prevent the participatory sermon going off at tangents, and needs usually to have some ideas of further points he or she wishes to make, in case the participation dries up. The preacher also needs to be quite clear what he or she has got from the passage, which they wish to pass on to the people.

The result of all this is, at present, the growth of a very strong oral tradition of specific stories and how they come alive in specific local contexts, situations and happenings. It amounts to the building up of a British urban 'Gospel Solentiname', this time a Gospel in Grimesthorpe, The Furnival, the Flower Estate. One of our current tasks in UTU is to record some of this material and allow others to share in it. It could mean a new version of the gospel, from the bottom, from the urban, which would build a new urban theology – which would be a new way for all of us of learning from, as well as learning within, the inner city.

NOTES

- ¹ Will Hutton, *The state we're in* (Revised ed. Vintage, 1996).
- ² John Davies and John Vincent, *Mark at work* (Bible Reading Fellowship, 1986).
- ³ *A petition of distress from the cities* (UTU, 1993).
- ⁴ *The cities' report of a Methodist working group* (NCH Action for Children, 1997).
- ⁵ John Vincent, *Good News in Britain* (UTU, 1994).
- ⁶ Chris Rowland and John Vincent (eds), *Liberation theology UK, British liberation theology* vol 1 (UTU, 1995).
- ⁷ Chris Rowland and John Vincent (eds), *Faith from the city, British liberation theology* vol 2 (UTU, 1997).