

Urban Ministry Intersections: Reflections on 50 years of life in multiethnic mission contexts

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*Audience.. Christians and church leaders with interest in work in
ethnoreligiously diverse and low income contexts*

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Introduction: Why the need for this paper?

There has been lots of thinking, writing, talking about mission and ministry in urban / low-income communities in the 40 years since the Faith in the City (FITC) report including conferences taking place and new books published in 2025 to mark the 40th anniversary in which I have been involved.

This essay is a reflection of my long involvement in the world and church of the inner city but it is written in the hope that some of my learning will be of use to a new generation of Christians and church leaders living, praying and working in urban neighbourhoods. I am hoping that by sharing some stories from my life, that churches, especially small and new ones, operating in such places will pick up some ideas that will help them to be faithful and fruitful in their ministry and mission.

There is perhaps less concern in the church and political world about inner city neighbourhoods today than in 1985, as many have been regenerated and/or gentrified. In urban mission circles, especially in the Church of England, the focus and language have moved towards “estates” and left behind communities with coastal towns highlighted as a special case. These tend to be supporting overwhelmingly white districts, where a high proportion of voters have supported Brexit, and recently Reform candidates.

Alongside the important work of the Anglican [Estates Evangelism Task Group](#) (EETG) and the ecumenical National Estates Churches Network ([NECN](#)) this concern has been well captured in a [recent report](#) from the Gregory Centre for Church Multiplication based on the work of Cris Rogers which is developed in his new book [Positive Urban Theology](#) “drawing on lived experience and a (contextualized) theological framework to help us reimagine urban mission”¹ However, these publications for all their strengths and solid findings would be familiar to

¹ I reviewed the book in a recent issue of Church Times
<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2026/7-august/books-arts/book-reviews/book-review-positive-urban-theology-finding-god-in-the-grit-and-glory-of-the-city-by-cris-rogers>

practitioners from the 1970s. It seems amazing that the report has not a single reference to ethnicity, racism, other world faiths or diaspora churches. (and in Cris's book there is only one page on intercultural church). There is lots of comment about cross cultural issues between working class and middle class Christians, but the implicit assumption is all of them are white and British.

At the same time there has been a growing parallel interest and accounts of [BME / Global Majority Heritage / diaspora churches](#) and the [Intercultural Church movement](#). However within these networks, despite references to social and racial justice, most of this conversation [and literature](#) lacks an engagement with poverty, economic inequality, educational disadvantage and social class. Most of the leadership and assumptions in this sector are framed by and around educated professionals with a heritage in the Global South / majority world.

Since 1985 ethnoreligious diversity has changed from "Black and Asian" to superdiversity, with more recent settler communities including both European migrant workers, Global South students and professionals, and sanctuary seeking settlers who have fled from persecution and conflict. Many of these people are not just poor, but precarious and on the edge of destitution. Yet in current Christian missiology thinking in the UK there seems to be a gap around the intersection of the poverty / inequality axis with the ethno-religious diversity factor. Such parish contexts are increasingly common in both cities and smaller towns across the UK (and the world). These are the neighbourhoods and local churches in which I have lived and worked for over 50 years.

More significantly this seems to highlight the silo thinking of the mission strategy of the Church of England as I perceive it². On the one hand there is an estate strategy that concentrates on left behind areas, assumed to be largely white British in background, and poor working class in economic circumstances and culture. In another camp is the intercultural church movement which may mention social justice, but rarely talks about issues of economics and social class, and is

² It is harder to discern what is happening in other denominations as in general they have a less centralised strategy for mission.

dominated by highly educated people from around the world. A strand is that which concentrates on racial and gender issues at the level of institutions and ideologies. Alongside these there is what remains of the interfaith movement, and the halting attempts of enthusiastic Cross-cultural evangelists to introduce people of other faiths to Jesus. In local parish life, in most urban settings, these strands need to be integrated if we are to build healthy churches which help local communities to flourish.

Mapping out the field reveals a threefold set of mission priorities:

1. **Poverty Projects...** responding to what [Shannahan & Denney](#) call the violence of the age of austerity. Although there are responses at various levels, and the Church Urban fund identifies a [multidimensional web of poverty](#), and supports a wide range of initiatives through its [Together Network](#), many local churches still focus on a charitable, food bank and soup kitchen approach.
2. **An [estates evangelism stream](#)** with [6 key strategic goals](#) which are predominantly about strengthening parish life and local leadership in income deprived parishes. There are close links with the ecumenical [National Estates Churches Network](#)., and in many places with the [Church Revitalisation and Church planting efforts of the network linked with Holy Trinity Brompton](#), and the incarnational mission teams linked with [the Eden Network](#).
3. **[Presence and Engagement](#)** which was set up in 2005 to encourage the Church of England to think about the reality of religious diversity and how it might shape mission and ministry. The emphasis in practice has been about inter-religious dialogue and partnership, and supporting the government's social cohesion agenda. CUF has taken government funding to develop the [Near Neighbours Network](#) operating and supporting local projects in a limited number of religiously diverse localities. The work of the [Anglican Intercultural Churches Network](#) also overlaps with this field, concentrating on congregational life, while the [Racial Justice](#) stream in the Church of England focuses on policy and strategy at the national and diocesan level.

In my view the fragmentation of effort and strategy into these different streams and specialisms have several negative consequences at the local level, and in preventing the development of holistic Kingdom ministry, informed by contextual (and liberation) theologies in many urban parishes and neighbourhoods. Usually only one of the streams filters through to inform practice at the level of the local parish or congregation. A broader synthesis seemed to be emerging in the 1980's and 1990's following the publication of Faith in the City but is hard to find in operation today.

My life and work over 5 decades

As someone with 50 years experience of urban church, mission, community work, local politics and social science research (the first half in East London, the second in Lancashire) I may be in a unique position to try to knit the elements together. I want to reflect theologically and sociologically on my experience, context and position as an old white man. I aim to extract lessons from my experience that will be of value to church leaders and Christian urban mission practitioners in coming decades. This paper is based on personal experience and rooted in local church practice, with an occasional excursus into some of the more academic sectors of my life's work. The paper is structured in sections for each of five decades, but these are not exactly separate, bounded periods of time. They are really a way of gathering the themes that were most salient during these seasons of life, but which often flowed over into the next decade(s).

This article is not to be taken as my "apologia pro vita sua" (even though my daughter and granddaughter have attended Cardinal Newman College!). Nor would I want to claim that God has guided or led every project and activity I describe below, or even that they have been grounded in prayer or holy obedience. However, in looking back over more than 40 years of wandering I do have a sense of divine direction as if there has been a fire and cloudy pillar which led me all my journey through. It is taken as given in all forms of church life that personal and corporate prayer is an essential undergirding of human contribution to God's purposes. Indeed, prayer is implicit in all the accounts I intend to present in this essay. However, I shall not write much about it for two reasons. Firstly, because my own personality does not push me towards a life of contemplation, intercession or adoration; I am much more of a Martha than a Mary and to be frank I find spirituality a more difficult area than action in social holiness. Secondly, prayer is totally mysterious, and though I am often able to perceive answers to prayer, they can easily be overinterpreted and often turn out to be negative answers, which need to be turned into learning experiences or even long-term lament.

Apart from a three-year period in Canning Town in the early 1980s, I have not been a “church leader”, “minister” or “pastor”. But I have always kept a deep and active “volunteer” involvement in local urban churches, as preacher, children’s worker, Church Council member, social action co-ordinator / adviser, and link to the local council and voluntary sector. Over 50 years I have been a member with my family of five different churches. Quite deliberately they have all been very local and within walking / cycling distance of our home. I believe the parish principle is essential in order to become an effective and faithful urban church. This means it should be drawing its congregation members from, and serving the people of, the local neighbourhood. In the places where we have lived and worshiped that means dealing with the impact of disadvantage and inequality, and the reality of ethno-religious diversity. At the same time the local “parish” is nested into wider geographies and structures, where the Borough or City Council, the Regional and National government, the “diocese” or denominational district, and the economic and population flows at global level are all significant.

Wider networking adds resources and wisdom to the business of the Kingdom of God. My personal career has largely been in this space, with paid roles in networking, community development, voluntary sector project management, community and academic research and writing. On reflection I am left pondering whether, or how well, I, or others in my networks who have similar roles, have been able to bridge the gaps between the worlds of para church organisations, local civic society, academia and the local church, in low income and ethno-religiously diverse areas.

There will be a lot of history here, with hyperlinks into a wide range of documents, my own and other colleagues’ publications. However, the focus will move from community work in Newham in the late twentieth century to ten years which were directly rooted in local parish experience in churches in Preston and the surrounding areas. The stories I share are very much set in local church experience, where the partners in mission and social action have been everyday Christians (and others) of a variety of personality types and understandings of the gospel and meaning of discipleship. Very few in the churches have shared my

understanding of radical, evangelical, contextual, liberative, Bible based theology, or the radical politics this has pushed me towards, which is taken as basic by many of my more academic and professional friends³. This however is a strength, as the holistic community focussed mission I describe can be worked out pragmatically in most urban churches where there is goodwill, openness and [the love of God shed abroad in our hearts. \(Romans 5.5\)](#)

DECADE 1 – 1975 - 85

Newham NCRP and Canning Town Methodists

I grew up as an only child in a Methodist farming family in rural Lincolnshire. Having passed the 11+ exam I went to the local grammar school and did well enough to enter Reading University to study Linguistics. During this time I came to a personal faith in Jesus. Following graduation and a double gap year which I spent as a VSO in India and a kitchen porter in an NHS hospital. I considered, and rejected a career in teaching, and was exploring a possible calling as a Methodist preacher, and potentially ordained minister.

In this context I ended up in the summer of 1975 as a trainee community worker with a Christian agency, the Newham Community Renewal Programme, which had recently been founded by [Clifford and Monica Hill](#) and other local clergy. When I first went to Newham for the job interview fifty-one years ago, I was clutching a copy of [David Sheppard's "Built as a City"](#). The borough of Newham was already becoming one of the most ethnically diverse areas in the UK, and had recently welcomed a large influx of South Asian refugees from Uganda and adjoining African countries. My first job involved organising and teaching community English classes for people from these communities. I also

³ For a more analytical overview and my account of the development of British urban ministry since the 1980s see my [Temple urban tract \(2021\)](#) and my chapter in the 2025 [Temple book marking the 40th anniversary of FITC 2025](#)

helped manage a newly established community centre in a [redundant Methodist Church](#). Here I soon became aware of ethnic and religious diversity⁴.

In the 1970s and 1980s the name Newham was synonymous with poverty. The borough was known as the outer part of London's East End, and rested at the bottom of all the league tables for deprivation, unemployment, poor health, low educational achievement and crime. The mainline churches were clearly in decline. Respectable and aspirational Christians with working-class roots were moving out of the inner city, mainly towards Essex. Some church leaders were predicting the extinction of the church in East London by the year 2000 and comparing the church members in flight to lemmings, migrating to the coast and over the end of Clacton pier to destruction

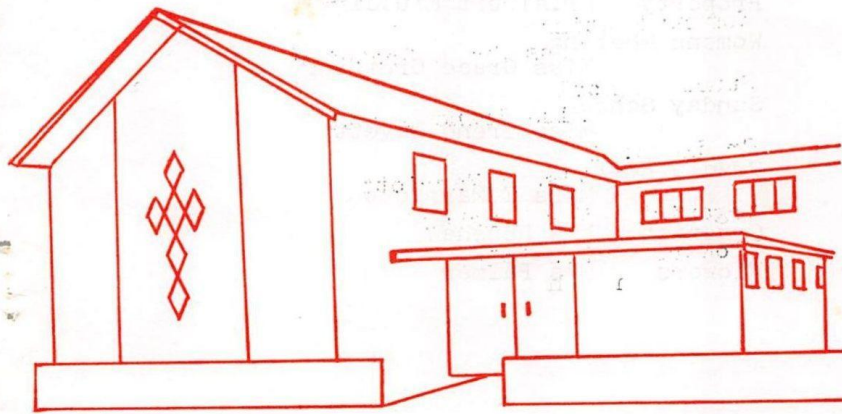
Fife Road Methodist and the Mayflower Centre

Canning Town (E16) in the 1980s, was clearly the poorest part of the borough of Newham. The Royal Docks had recently closed and unemployment rates were high. The vast majority of housing was council owned including a significant number of high-rise tower blocks. The most notorious of these was [Ronan Point which, some years earlier had collapsed, following a gas explosion](#). Many people in the white working class community gloried in their local cockney culture, their alleged connection with [the Kray twins](#) and in their support of West Ham United.

⁴ A few years ago I wrote about my learning curve and growing involvement in [multiculturalism and anti racism in my blog](#)

Fife Road Methodist Church

ANNUAL REPORT
OCT. 1980



In 1979 I left the Renewal Programme and was appointed part time lay pastor of Fife Road Methodist Church. This was a modern building set among tower blocks with a small elderly traditional congregation of white East Enders with a couple of Windrush generation Jamaicans and two or three student age young people. We worked closely with the Mayflower Centre just down the road, who specialised in youth work, and with St Lukes Church which had once been the Anglo Catholic cathedral of Docklands. There were also a couple of Evangelical Churches and a large Roman Catholic Parish as well as a number of black majority Pentecostal groups who wanted to use our buildings. We worked closely with the local school and put on a weekly rather chaotic kids after school club, with no formal safeguarding policy. A group of local Christians produced and [published a quarterly community newspaper](#) which was distributed about the estate. We encountered all the usual issues of

inner-city poverty and were fearful because of the strength of the National Front and the racist attitudes of many local residents. An African student who had become very much part of the local congregation was beaten up in the street, not helped by the police, and eventually treated harshly by the immigration authorities.

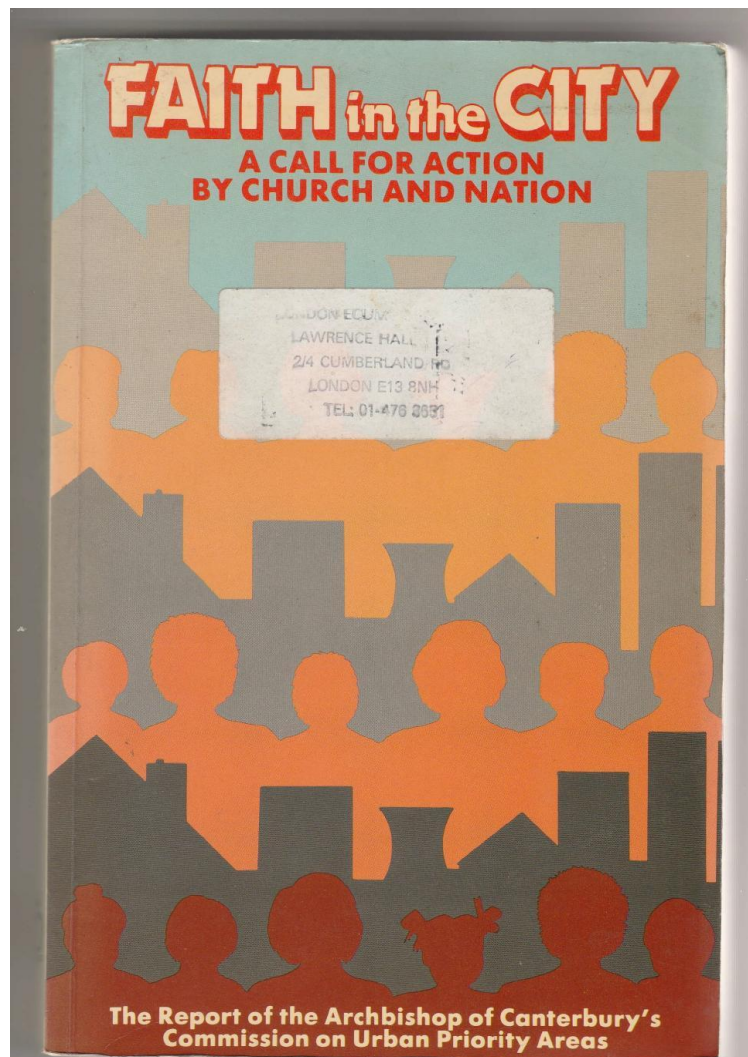
This was a classic old style estate ministry, with an evangelical thrust, in a context of church decline. where ethnic and religious diversity was just beginning to surface as an issue. The Methodist District had closed many neighbouring urban churches and had few resources to develop and expand its work. Nonetheless the church survived, has lived through the massive regeneration of Newham Docklands and continues as a very different [worshipping congregation through to today](#).

DECADE 2 – 1985 - 1995 FITC ECUM ECRJ

The Church of England also became worried about the inner cities. Archbishop Robert Runcie's Commission on Urban Priority Areas (ACUPA) recruited members and took evidence from many cities and parishes, and the Faith in The City (FITC) report was published in December 1985. I was involved in researching the state of the church in Newham and [produced a report which was submitted to the commission](#). It included an initial mapping of the growing range of Black Majority and diaspora congregations in the borough. At the same time, I was becoming more involved at the national level on campaigns in the churches and beyond on issues of racial justice, mainly through Evangelical Christians for Racial Justice⁵. All the ECRJ journals and much more on racial justice from the 1980s are [in this shared folder](#) I was writing theologically about Church growth and critiquing the Homogeneous Unit principle. I produced two significant papers, one on the [Biblical theology of ethnicity](#), and another on the diversity of [Christianity in our inner city setting from a sociological perspective](#). In a third paper based on stories collected from visits to urban churches around the country I published a theological reflection [In the Inner City](#):

⁵ The organisation was known in its early days as the Evangelical Race Relations Group (ERRG) and was largely composed of Anglican clergy in multi-ethnic parishes.

[How can we tell if God is at Work?](#) with an implicit Missio Dei missiological framework. A lot of my research and thinking talked about religious diversity as the context for mission, and recognized the context of urban deprivation. Yet on reflection it never engaged sufficiently with what poverty meant in such local churches and communities.



By this time I had become a member of Plaistow Christian Fellowship, which was a newly planted independent church with a charismatic ethos and a way of being that some people commented resembled that of Latin American base communities⁶. The congregation was the mixture of intentional Christian incomers to Newham and local people who had been brought into the congregation through missional outreach on the

⁶ Indeed in the late 1980s a couple of close Christian friends travelled to Central America in order to make contact with and learn from such communities.

local council estates. Some of the incomers were of overseas background, in particular people of Chinese and Indian heritage from Malaysia and Singapore, while most of the educated (mostly) white British incomers were happily engaged in the multicultural community of Newham. The locals were mostly from a white working-class cockney background, and were more likely to be struggling with the demographic and ethnic changes which were impacting the borough. Most of them were of relatively low income and some living off benefits and struggling with serious poverty. We encountered people in recurrent dire need, as benefits failed to come through and big bills didn't, and fielded many requests for help. Jane and I, as the adults in an affluent family, learned to be generous, to refuse a lifestyle of over conspicuous consumption (no posh cars or foreign holidays). We tried to do life together, to share time, resources and child care with neighbours and fellow believers. We also decided never to lend money, but to give it away, directly to (or sometimes employed) people who were skint who we knew personally through church.

It was remarkable, and totally down to God's grace and the work of the Holy Spirit, that this Fellowship held together mostly in harmony and has continued to be an active witness in the borough to this day. The work of this church and its various members has made a significant impact on the Christian and community life of Newham and beyond that on wider urban mission networks and local and national politics.

During the late 1980s I was also privileged through my role as field officer of the Evangelical Coalition for Urban Mission (ECUM) to be a networker and researcher in touch with a wide range of similar churches and Christian projects in Inner City communities across London and in places such as Liverpool, Birmingham, Bradford, Leeds, Bristol and Tyneside. I was involved in the production of the [journal City Cries](#) which captured the ethos of urban mission at the time. In all of these cities I observed a context of multiple deprivation and growing ethnic and religious diversity. I met many Christians who were engaged in their localities but found that most of them gave priority to a single issue, either evangelism and church growth in their neighbourhood, community development, youth work, racial justice, interfaith relations,

homelessness and housing, campaigning about poverty and welfare, or work and unemployment.

DECADE 3 – 1995 -2005

Urban Regeneration and Research with Church and Community Involvement in Newham



In the 1990s as our children grew up, we attended Woodgrange Baptist Church, with its majority black, predominantly Caribbean (Windrush generation) congregation⁷. The white minister had already been in post there for 25 years, and had been committed to welcoming black people and involving them in the leadership of the church. During the 1980s and early 90s the church had developed a strong youth ministry and had employed full-time youth workers. One of them had trained as a debt counsellor and was offering money advice sessions. The Sunday worship of the church was traditional Baptist with hymns, choruses, prayers and a sermon. The black people dressed up for church, in suits and hats, the white folk dressed more casually. A junior gospel choir was loosely attached to the church and competed successfully in London wide competitions. There was one white nine-year-old boy in the lineup. The church operated at its most intercultural, when food was involved. Harvest Suppers on a bring and share basis, involved rice and peas, jerk chicken, jolof rice, samosas, sweet potato pudding, fruit crumble and cheese sandwiches. The trust deed of the building prohibited alcohol, but cakes laced with rum were somehow exempt. Other black majority churches also used the building, especially for conventions and Baptism services.

At this period there was a strong network of Newham churches who worked together on social action and poverty alleviation programmes. During the 1990s I was employed by [the Aston Charities Community involvement unit](#) in a community research and community development role, helping faith and voluntary sector groups to plan and develop their programmes. The churches in Plaistow developed a Sunday lunch club, known as NOSH (Newham Organisation for Stopping Hunger) or alternatively DINS (Dine Inexpensively Next Sunday) where volunteers regularly fed and socialised with thirty or more people on low incomes. Many already had large waistlines, and were in many cases lonely and isolated. It was a mainly white British clientele.

Growing concern about child and family poverty especially as Newham had one of the highest birth rates in the country. The community

⁷ (whose story I [wrote up in this piece](#))

involvement unit initiated a baby bank project⁸ based at a local Methodist Church. Funded by the local health authority⁹ it supplied free and cheap baby and toddler equipment to needy families who had been referred by social workers or health visitors. Much of the equipment was donated as used items by Christian families. The project operated successfully for a number of years and served families across the widely diverse population of Newham.

The [second area of concern was homelessness](#). After researching the issues locally the Newham churches came together to offer a winter night shelter program. Seven churches agreed to open on a weekly rota basis, and were able to offer 30 bed spaces, an evening meal and breakfast in their church halls. A large team of volunteers was recruited to cook and serve food, with a couple of paid staff and volunteers covering overnight duties. At first the majority of guests were stereotypical Street Homeless men, many of whom had backgrounds with broken relationships, addictions and mental health issues. But as time went on the service users became more diverse including women, people from ethnic minorities and asylum seekers and refugees. Similar shelters were developed in neighbouring London boroughs, and the work has continued so that a [30 years later most of the capital has this type of provision](#). Jon Kuhrt has written and developed good practice about the role of [Christian faith in responses to homelessness](#) based on long experience in the field, both in a local church and larger faith based organisations. And in Manchester the [Boaz Trust](#) has developed a wide range of [services to support the growing number of asylum seekers](#) and refugees who experience homelessness, while in Blackburn Christian charity [Kairos Housing](#) does similar work.

Money Matters

It goes without saying that **the main cause of poverty is not having enough money**. Hundreds of research projects and reflections on the gospel and the poor have produced thousands of books and articles and millions of words about poverty. But it is probably more important for

⁸ [\(see page 19 in this booklet\)](#)

⁹ A grant of £25,000 was secured following a meeting where, because of a child care crisis, I was compelled to attend along with my one year old daughter!

Christians and local churches to do something about it. Faith based action began in the Old Testament and was a keynote of the early church (Acts 4;35). For me personally serious involvement began in the late 1980s. A key influence and inspiration for me was the work and life of [Bob Holman a respected social policy academic and writer](#), who with his family had chosen to live and serve alongside people facing disadvantage in social housing estates in Bath and later Easterhouse.

Nonetheless a majority of British people, including Christians persist, in making a distinction between deserving and undeserving poor, between “strivers and skivers”. A [survey of UK Evangelicals that I worked on in 2015](#) ¹⁰suggested that Christians tend to think that poverty is fundamentally the result of personal failings (such as addictions, broken families and poor budgeting) and welfare dependency. In contrast they understand poverty in the developing world is more systemic and structural. These views are well countered in the book by [Charlesworth and Williams \(2014\)](#)

Through involvement in the work of [Church Action on Poverty](#) I became aware of many different projects, campaigns and approaches that directly challenged poverty and empowered people who were struggling. One of these was Credit Unions which had been well developed in Ireland, Jamaica, USA, Canada and India, but were only slowly emerging in the UK.

Inspired by this we began an informal experimental Savings club at Plaistow Christian Fellowship in the early 1990s. Our hope was that this might develop into a credit union. In reality it was not very successful¹¹.. Meanwhile at Woodgrange Baptist Church we met Bill Johnstone, a Windrush generation Jamaican who was the chair and moving spirit behind the Forest Gate Credit Union which had an active presence in Newham’s black community. Like many Caribbean Credit Unions this started as a pardner scheme. The pardner system was brought to

¹⁰ (see pages 14 and 15 of the report)

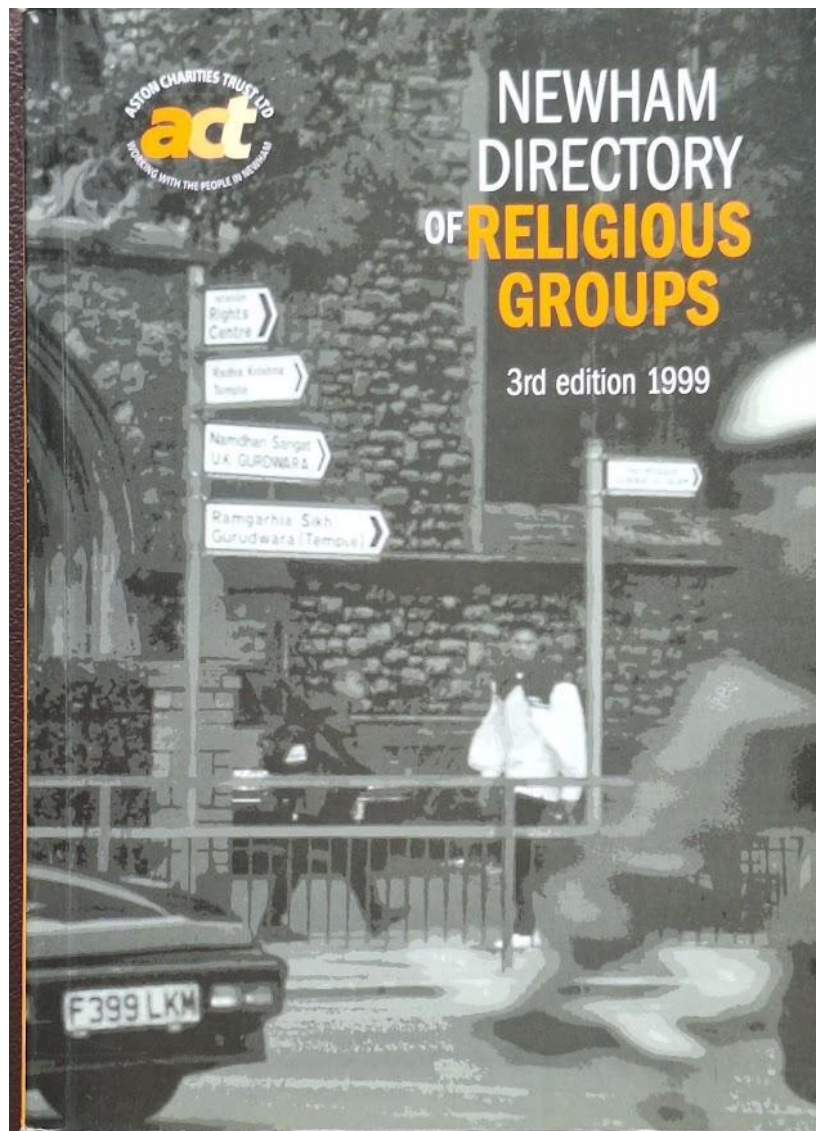
¹¹ It is described and evaluated in [idea 7 in this document](#)

Jamaica by enslaved Africans and was originally used as a device to purchase freedom. See [pardner money - stories & poems](#)

The context of diversity in Newham made it obvious that poverty was not restricted to white working class communities. As researcher in the Aston Community Involvement unit I was able to commission [a small study about Bangladeshi women and poverty](#)

I also wrote [a more polished version about ideas for poverty alleviation work](#) published in 1992

For ten years from about 1995 I was more involved in academic research and policy related writing than in local community work. I directed the research work of three editions of the Newham directory of religious groups, and wrote several academic papers on religious diversity and globalisation from a sociology of religion perspective. I worked as a research fellow at the University of East London , and was involved in a number of funded projects supported mostly by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Under the New Labour government, it was a time of extensive urban regeneration programmes both in Newham and later , when I had moved to Preston. I played an active part in research and development programmes in Canning, Town and Little Ilford. I worked with colleagues from Coventry, Bradford and Sheffield. In researching the role of [faith communities in urban regeneration](#). I led an ethnographic project, looking at the perspectives of primary aged children growing up in multi-ethnic and multi-faith environments in Newham and Preston. And after moving to Preston, I became a board member of the [Avencentral SRB programme](#). In Preston, I became involved in formal interfaith activity. Undertaken research through the [Preston Bridge Builders](#) project., and worked with the local authority in the context of the preston faith forum , and eventually in establishing [a faith covenant for the city](#)



After the move north, I was finding my feet in the local church community in Preston through active membership and involvement in children's work at St Stephen's church. With a Baptist minister who had also recently moved from Newham, a Salvation Army officer and other church leaders, we drew together churches and projects across the city in [the Preston Christian Action Network](#). The aim was to bring local Christians together for support, thinking and project development, in social action and community development. At its peak about thirty local churches and their associated projects were involved or being supported,

DECADE 4 – 2005 -2015 Local Social Action with Churches in Lancashire

My fourth decade, which stretched on to my retirement from paid employment in 2018, was mainly about church linked social action work, much of it in response to the austerity climate that followed the banking crash of 2008. I was employed by The Salvation Army in their brand-new community centre and worship hall for five years up to 2010. There was a focus on managing building for the community, drop-in services for homeless people and an emerging food bank. I was also involved in setting up and promoting the Preston Homeless Forum which networked agencies across the sectors in collaborative work in support of homeless and vulnerable people. At the Salvation Army there was also a major project developing a computer suite and programmes for digital inclusion for older people, and for the unemployed. There was also time and space to expand the work of PCAN, the Christian action network, and some ultimately unsuccessful work helping a city centre Baptist church to look at ways it could avoid closure and develop the building for the work of the Kingdom.

From 2011 I was employed in two part-time jobs. The first involved doing [survey research on evangelical Christians across the UK through the Evangelical Alliance](#). The second was development work with churches across Lancashire with the ecumenical organisation Together Lancashire which was funded by [the Church Urban Fund](#) and line managed by Blackburn Diocese. In many ways it was a resurrection of my former job with ECUM from the nineteen eighties, networking project development and organising of conferences and events. I covered the area from Preston to the coast, including Blackpool, Fleetwood and Morecambe. Many churches were responding to the climate of austerity and welfare reform by developing food banks and food markets, open kitchens and cafes for the homeless and vulnerable, work clubs and other employment projects, and debt counselling and money advice programmes through Christians Against Poverty. Most of the towns in which we worked had a predominantly white British population, and the

assumptions were often about reaching out to the white, working and non-working classes.

Concern about money and poverty continued in the new millennium, and in the second half of my career in Lancashire I have had various involvements. I came across [Christians Against Poverty](#) as their local work was developing and have supported them and referred people to some of their debt counseling and job club services based at local churches. While I was working for [CUF's Together Network](#) I was involved in discussions about policy development for the [Just Finance Foundation](#). As I became involved with the Voluntary Sector Networks in Preston and developing partnerships with the City Council I played a part in the setting up and promotion of the local credit union <https://www.clevr.money/> and in the conversations about establishing a sub-regional bank. I became involved in Preston City Council's cross sector working group on poverty and social inclusion. I helped organize the "Church of the Poor" conference held in the region in 2016, which encouraged faith leaders to give priority in their discussions and interventions on poverty with the lived experiences and stories of people struggling with poverty. In this context I was part of the group that first moved to establish [Morecambe Bay Poverty Truth Commission](#) and its equivalent in Blackpool.

In Preston, Blackburn and Burnley there was already considerable ethnoreligious diversity, and by the end of this period asylum seekers and refugees were arriving in large numbers in various towns across the county, including Lancaster, Skelmersdale, Burnley, Preston and Blackburn. In 2017 two thousand and 2018 Together Lancashire was responsible for convening the first countywide cross sector conferences on responding to the issues around asylum seekers and refugees. We also played a significant part in establishing the [City of Sanctuary movement in Preston](#) and beyond.

DECADE 5 – 2016-2026 – Retirement, City of Sanctuary and parish life

The fifth decade that I will now talk about is one where I have been retired from paid work. It has also been a decade of crisis for the United Kingdom, following the Brexit referendum in 2016 and the trauma of the COVID pandemic. It has been marked by political turbulence, the influence of social media, and polarised debates largely focused on immigration and national identity. It has seen the re-emergence of explicitly racist and xenophobic narratives, which have gained some traction within the churches in the guise of christian nationalism. I have written about these macro level issues in various places and publications. However, in my account of this recent decade I am going to concentrate on my experience within local church life, in particular on three parishes in Preston with which I have been actively involved.

St Matthew's

Saint Matthew's Preston is in the East End of the city, and like many “east ends” has a population which is struggling against disadvantage and is ethnically diverse. There is poor housing of the old terraced streets type with some areas of more substantial ex Council housing. There is a large Muslim population, mostly of Pakistani heritage and in recent years, a large number of Polish and Romanian migrants. Unemployment is high and health indicators are poor. The old Victorian church building is difficult to heat and a problem in terms of access. A few streets away, there is also a one hundred and thirty year-old mission hall, which is easier to use but looks shabby and has a number of structural problems. For the last twenty years Saint Matthew's has been part of a joint parish with Saint James Avenham, trading under the name of Parish of the Risen Lord. There is a church school with a Victorian building, working hard to offer a decent education to local children. Nearly ninety percent of them come from various ethnic minorities, and although the school has a strong Christian ethos, about seventy percent are Muslim.

For a dozen years from about 2012 Jane and I were actively involved in the life and mission of the parish. During the time, we worked with two different vicars and three different curates. We were among about a dozen older couples and a few retired singles who had made a serious commitment to support the work of the parish. All of them had responded to a Macedonian call to come over and help the mission of the parish. The archdeacon described it as a missional community. A number had become very involved in the Preston Street Pastors organisation. One couple had made the decision to buy a house within the most deprived area of the parish and lived and served there for over ten years. We considered doing the same, but at the time we began looking for property our family and household circumstances changed, when a couple of people who were in very difficult circumstances came to live in our home. For complex reasons they would not have been safe or comfortable, living in the east end of Preston. Therefore, during our time with St Matthew's, we commuted a couple of miles to Sunday worship and parish activities, sometimes by bike, and sometimes in the car.

The Anglican tradition of the church had been mixed. But during our time there, the leadership and ministry was clearly evangelical. Our first vicar had some charismatic preferences, while the second was more Conservative and reformed in his theology. Both of them had come late in life to urban ministry but were very committed and open to learn about reaching out to the people of the parish, using social action and community-based activities. The first curate we worked with was an older man with strong professional experience in community development, the second was from a Pakistani Christian family, and the third was a younger family man fresh from Oakhill college. We also had an unpaid pastoral assistant who was a retired senior social worker, and for a couple of years employed a children and family worker in partnership with the primary school.

The pre-pandemic congregation was small, never reaching more than fifty on a Sunday. About half of these were traditional Church of England people living (or born and raised) within the parish. Most of them were seniors, including a core group of about a dozen black people who had been born in the Caribbean, from the islands of Jamaica and Montserrat.

The partnership with the local church school was very important. Clergy and others were involved as school governors, and there were plenty of opportunities to take part in assemblies and other activities in the school. Following an unsatisfactory Ofsted inspection in 2020 the governors made the difficult and controversial decision to become an Academy under the auspices of the diocesan Academy Trust.

For about five years under the first of the vicars, we committed to putting on a Messy Church session two or three times a term on a Saturday afternoon, recruiting families from our Church school. This worked well and attracted up to thirty families, including a significant number of muslim ones. I wrote about the joys and [dilemmas of this ministry in a blog for the William Temple foundation](#). For two or three years, we also ran a brief holiday Bible club in the summer holidays, attracting the same diverse clientele.

One of the interesting things that developed through our connections with the school and the community was pastoral work with a small number of Muslim women. They came to the church in considerable distress as a result of marriage and family breakup, domestic abuse, and a measure of rejection by their own community. This was compounded by financial struggles, and in a couple of cases by complex situations over immigration. The compassion and skilled pastoral social work by some of the women in the church help to ensure positive outcomes for these women and their children as well as some interesting conversations about Jesus.

It was not surprising that there was some concern about the young people who lived in the parish, especially as some of them were becoming noticed for their antisocial behaviour, and struggles with the education system. The parish built a partnership with a specialist youth organisation, Fusion. Following some research among young people and organisations offering services in the area the parish was able to establish a youth cafe project meeting weekly on a Tuesday night. The activities on offer resembled those of an old-style church youth club, with indoor games, craft activities, cooking and food, occasional outings, and

conversations about the meaning of life and faith. Apart from a couple of workers from the Fusion team, a half dozen volunteers were all retired people. The youth cafe continued for a number of years but came to a natural end with the pandemic.

Unemployment and low skills for work was a significant issue in the neighbourhood. The parish heard about through PCAN and latched on to some DWP Funding and concern to help people back into work. With this support from 2012, the parish for 14 years ran a weekly work club. A set of laptop computers was purchased and later renewed, broad band and wi-fi was installed in the mission hall, and a team of volunteers was assembled. In the early days a couple of these were people who had long experience in careers advice work. Visitors were helped to apply for jobs, to develop their computing skills, to write CV's and prepare for job interviews. A distinctive part of the ethos was that members were treated as whole persons and not simply cases or numbers as they had been at the Job Centre. Many asked for and received prayer. A small number successfully found employment. In my work with Together Lancashire I had been involved with the Council in convening a city-wide work club support network in which St Matthew's played a full part.

However, towards the end of the period and particularly post pandemic, the clientele were predominantly hard core, long term unemployed people, often older local men who had become redundant in their late fifties. Some were facing significant mental health challenges and found the new digital progresses of claiming benefits and applying for jobs totally daunting. As time went on the provision of food became a more significant part of the offer. A number of statutory agencies offering housing, health and money advice, held drop-in clinics within the context of the work club. Service users came from all sections and ethnic groups within the local community.



- Friendly informal sessions open to all local adults
- Helping job seekers find work
- Free access to computers and the internet with support if you need it

- Linking you to other groups specialising in finance, benefits, health, housing, training etc.
- Free Refreshments
- A project of St Matthews Church

Every Monday Afternoon (except Bank Holidays)

1pm – 3-30pm

Drop in by 3.00pm to receive free help

St Matthews Mission, 117 Acregate Lane, Preston. PR1 5QQ

For further information please email:

matthewacregate@gmail.com or phone: 01772 446913



Our toddlers group thrived, and gave space for parents and carers to socialise and support each other. Local leaders emerged, most of whom were not church members, and from these other activities such as the children's clothing Swap Shop emerged. Our church minibus, generously donated and maintained by a local garage, with its amazing volunteer driver, was out on the roads each week, offering day trips, and twice-yearly short seaside holidays to elderly and disabled people. We also had contact with a number of independent Christian groups who wanted to rent out our church buildings. For a while, a small independent Pentecostal fellowship serving some of the most marginalised people from the local neighbourhood used our building on a Sunday night. And for a longer period, the Syrian Orthodox Malabar Christian community. hired the mission hall for Saturday meetings attracting worshippers from their Keralan diaspora across the region. We also had enquiries from Polish and Romanian fellowships but were unable to fit them in.

Food poverty was a growing feature of life in Britain in the decade of austerity after 2010. In response many churches developed food bank services., Saint Matthew's started to offer small packages of food to people in need. Under growing awareness of holiday hunger and with the development of a network of food providers across Preston and support and some funding from the local authority, we decided to establish a food market project in each of the major school holidays. We became members of Fair Share, who provided at very low cost both fresh and long-life food. We set up our stalls in the side aisle of the church building. Having advertised the dates through the local school, there was usually a queue of 20 or so families outside the church at opening time. They represented the ethnic diversity of the community, who were all struggling to survive on a very low income. We labelled anything that was clearly not halal. We asked each family to pay a couple of pounds as an entrance to the market. In return they could take away one or two big shopping bags of various food items. Leftover food was taken to a variety of local homeless and charitable projects. We encouraged people to stay for a brew and a chat, and occasionally were able to talk about Jesus and the church.

During the pandemic, when lockdown was in force, the market transformed itself into a food parcel delivery service, operating in term as well as holiday time and supporting households who we know were in need, together with those who had been referred by other agencies.

A constant issue was how the parish should respond to requests for financial help, especially in the case of people who casually knocked on the church or vicarage door. The general policy was that clergy would never give out cash, and were not naive in listening to hard luck stories they were presented with. However, the parish did hold a substantial Compassion Fund, that had been built up from donations from people of goodwill, and other more prosperous suburban and rural churches within our network. For people who said they had run out of gas and electricity it was usually possible to put some money on meter cards, so the fuel supply could be restored. For those saying they had no food in the house we had some store cupboards, filled with basic provisions, the option in holidays of using our food markets, referrals to other local food

banks, In the post pandemic period we had a stock of Aldi supermarket vouchers, usually for £20 of groceries only.

Some people we encountered were people facing a critical financial crisis, such as stopped benefits or absent child support payments, sudden redundancy or employers withholding wages, relationship breakdown, or legal bills for immigration cases. When these came to light a few affluent and generous individuals directly covered the costs, without any of the money passing through church accounts. In obedience to Matthew 6;3 *when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing*. In one instance we collected for immigration legal fees nationally via a just giving page shared on social media with our Christian contacts. Such gifts were usually restricted to people we knew well through their attendance at worship or church and school activities. We were conscious that we didn't want to trap people in long term dependence on charity but also wanted to avoid obligation to debt repayment.

By 2019 we were beginning to think, pray and plan for the future, in the awareness that our active members were aging and tiring, and that to sustain the work of God in the parish we would be entering a season of generational change. We made contact with the [Eden Network](#) who recruit and establish teams of urban missionaries, who live and serve alongside churches in neighbourhoods such as ours. We had agreed in principle to recruit and find funding for a team leader. And then early in 2020 a tiny virus crept into the UK. The country went into lockdown, in person church activity stopped, and we quickly learned to pray and worship online, and keep in touch with each other by Zoom, phone, and WhatsApp groups.

When lockdown finished and it was possible to resume the usual worship and community activities it was decided to make a fresh start by moving Sunday worship to the Mission Hall, and operating in a more informal cafe church style. The service still used some recognisably Anglican liturgy but the congregation were seated around tables with a brew in their hands, and ended with a simple shared meal. On the weeks we celebrated communion we used individual cups set out in advance

on the tables. With no musicians in the fellowship, singing was congregational karaoke, using worship songs and hymns available on YouTube.



During the summer of 2020, at the peak of the pandemic the parish was blessed by the arrival of a curate, with his wife and very young family, to work alongside the vicar and lay volunteers. (What did the diocese ever do for us? They sent us clergy who were great). This enabled a number of new activities and groups to form, mainly reaching out to families and young people in the area, including Christianity Explored groups, and an informal midweek Bible and Pizza group. There were signs of growth in attendance, in a sense of belonging, and for a small number of people coming to faith in Jesus. By the summer of 2023, when the curate's term came to an end as he moved to be vicar of a parish in a neighbouring town, the usual morning congregation was around 35 adults with half a dozen children. We counted people born and raised in nine different countries, (England, Scotland, Netherlands and Ireland, Jamaica, Montserrat, USA, Nigeria, India, Pakistan and Iran.) There was a social class range from university academics, to refugees and semi homeless, not quite recovering addicts. A handful of people were new local Christians, having come to faith through parish outreach activities, or courses such as Alpha and Christianity Explored, and a family Bible and

Pizza teatime session. We concluded that God was working in significant ways to make this gathering and growth possible. I don't think I have ever seen a more diverse group of people regularly meeting together. During the week our community activities, work club, toddlers, holiday markets, and bus outings, were back in business and beginning to thrive again.

With input from the city Council a local community network partnership had been set up. FOFS (Friends of Fishwick and St Matthew's) brought together a wide range of community, Faith and statutory groups for regular meetings and to organize events such as Fun Days. Clergy and the couple who had moved into the neighbourhood played an active role in this network. Following a consultation process drawing up a local neighbourhood plan, Big Local Lottery funding of £1million over 10 years was allocated to the neighbourhood. During the final years of this scheme when we were without clergy I served on the board of this scheme.

The final significant challenge in the post pandemic period was working out to work with new arrivals who had come to live in the parish during the "Boris Wave" of immigration that peaked in 2023. Our first contact was in 2022 with an Iranian Christian asylum seeker who had walked all the way from Turkey to the French Coast and then crossed the Channel. The Home Office had housed him two streets away from our church. He became a regular attender, prayed earnestly with us and became our friend. Four years on after active help in dealing with the authorities, plus generous financial assistance, he has refugee status, his family have been reunited, and are decently rehoused in another part of the city where they attend their local parish church. For a while a few other Iranian believers attended the church and one was baptised. However, their lives were more precarious and mobile so they soon moved away and we lost touch.

The post pandemic, Boris wave of immigration to the U.K. peaked in 2023. A large proportion of these new arrivals work as health or care workers and hundreds of them, mostly from India, Nepal or Nigeria, arrived in Preston, alongside overseas students who looked for part-time

work in the sector. Many of the people on care sponsorship visas had been recruited by agents in their home countries with promises and hopes of secure high-paid employment. They were not expecting (or had at least underestimated) the difficulties with housing and surviving in a hostile environment, in which they would have no recourse to public funds and limited rights to public services.

Worse still, some of the agencies that had sold them sponsorship and arranged the visas were completely fraudulent. They did not own care homes or hold contracts to supply carers. At best they might be offered zero hours contracts, many in domiciliary care, or as agency staff in residential homes scattered across the region, with high costs of transport, plus occasional illegal work in food processing factories. To meet the conditions of Home Office sponsorship licenses false pay slips documenting full-time hours worked were issued and proportionate tax and NI deductions had to be paid, leaving the employee with miniscule or even negative take home pay.

As a church we first discovered this situation of near slavery when a South Indian Christian woman came to our Sunday service. She shared her story and asked for help to find her proper employment in the care sector. She was a single parent and under the regulations of the time had been able to bring her nine-year-old son to join her. However, she had not automatically been given a school place, and the first one her son was offered was twenty-five miles from Preston. Eventually we found a school place only about three miles from his home.

I wrote about this case and the systematic issues behind it in [a blog published by Church action on Poverty](#). I will not rehearse the arguments here, but note that over three years offering pastoral and financial support to one small family has been a costly and emotionally difficult experience for a small Christian fellowship, with no official help or support system from the state or institutional church. It has involved learning about immigration and employment and housing rights, working with a child's school and transfer to the secondary school sector. It has raised significant concerns about safeguarding for a child living in a single bedsit in a house of multiple occupation, when the mother has to

work some difficult shift patterns which do not coincide with the school day or holidays. We have come to understand that these lives will never reach the standard most British people aspire to. The best that is likely long term, is survival and struggle, helped by the informal support of friendly neighbours, colleagues and peers in the struggle, and church people, from a number of local fellowships. We have found that no church as an organisation, no statutory agency or voluntary sector group has the understanding, capacity or systems to challenge these abuses and structural sins, while the victims are so powerless and vulnerable that they dare not report illegality to the authorities, or organize together on a trade union basis, for fear of making their situation worse.

The post pandemic period at St Matthew's, despite all the challenges was in many ways a season of blessing and hope. Unfortunately, the season came to a sad ending. The curate moved on after his three-year term to become a vicar with his own parish in a neighbouring town in the summer of 2023, Less than two months later our vicar became ill and was diagnosed with brain tumours. Despite surgery and chemotherapy, and the earnest prayers of the faithful, the diagnosis proved terminal, and from the autumn of 2023 until his death at the end of 2024 he played no further part in the parish.

Our vicar had been anticipating retirement by the end of 2023 and for at least three years we had been in conversation with the diocese and the city's HTB resource church about working together to revitalise the mission and ministry of the parish. The process and planning became difficult and ended with me, feeling with some anger and great distress, that it was impossible to continue involvement under the proposed new arrangements¹². Some worship (but not at familiar times on Sunday) and ministry continues in the parish and school, but much of the community work, wider partnerships and outreach has ended. A number of

¹² I do not intend to develop the story in this essay, but I have made [a full account of the crisis available via my blog](#), in the hope that it may show some issues for diocesan and national leaders of the CofE.

congregation members have joined other local churches, and sadly a number of members have died.

The story of St Matthew's in this remarkable season, highlights the value of small urban parish church, with a diverse congregation, meeting for worship, prayer, learning, eating together and developing close fellowship and mutual support. It affirms the value of a committed team of lay volunteers, rooting down in the life of the neighbourhood, and not being shocked or dismissive of local people. It also illustrates how much of the work of God takes place "under the radar" and cannot be measured or managed by institutional systems and metrics.

Saint Matthew's was a very unusual small church. I want to round off this article by giving a brief account of two other ordinary churches in Preston that have engaged with the complex issues at the interface between poverty and ethnoreligious diversity.

St Stephen's

We have known and been involved with St Stephen's church in Broadgate, since we moved to Preston nearly twenty-five years ago. Jane and I were active members there doing our children's teenage years, up to 2011. They both went briefly to the local church primary school and later to the Church of England high school on the other side of the city. When we moved from London to Preston, we chose to live in Broadgate / Saint Stephen's parish. This was partly because of the demography of the area, the green environment and the nature of the housing that was available to us. It is an area close to the city centre and the railway station but lies along the river Ribble, where there is extensive parkland and green space. Nonetheless the parish also counts as an area of multiple deprivation. And since the 1970s it has been ethnically diverse, there are two Hindu temples, a Sikh Gurudwara, a mosque (now with a magnificent new building) and a Buddhist centre within the neighbourhood. After a quarter of century living in the East End of London, it felt like a neighbourhood in which we would soon be at home.

Having left a Baptist church in London at first we resisted the idea of joining the established church. But having discovered there were no Free churches offering suitable work for children and teenagers in our part of Preston we bit the bullet and became members of St Stephen's. We were involved there for just over 10 years before committing to St Matthew's and now in our retirement, we are back again.

Saint Stephen's has a modern parish centre built on the site of the original Victorian church in the 1990s, set in the heart of the most urban part of the parish amongst tightly packed streets of terraced houses. Over 25 years, we have known five different vicars and a number of curates and have developed strong relationships and friendships with many of the lay members. We now live next door to the ninety-year-old matriarch of the church. St Stephen's has about 100 active members the majority of whom are highly educated and middle class. Probably half of them live outside the parish, mostly across the river in the affluent suburban area of Penwortham.

The ethos of the church has always been evangelical, but with a strong focus on serving all the people of the parish. Since the 1970s when some of the first new Commonwealth immigrants and East African Asian refugees settled in the area, there has been a serious concern for cross-cultural, outreach and healthy interfaith relationships. Some of the older women in the church were involved more than 40 years ago in organising, and teaching in, community English classes for the new arrivals. The vicar who had served here in the period just before we arrived had overseas experience and went on to become the diocesan interfaith advisor and in his final post vicar of an inner-city parish in Bradford. In his time in the post Faith in the City period a significant number of couples intentionally settled in the parish following their university courses in Preston and continue to serve in the church today.

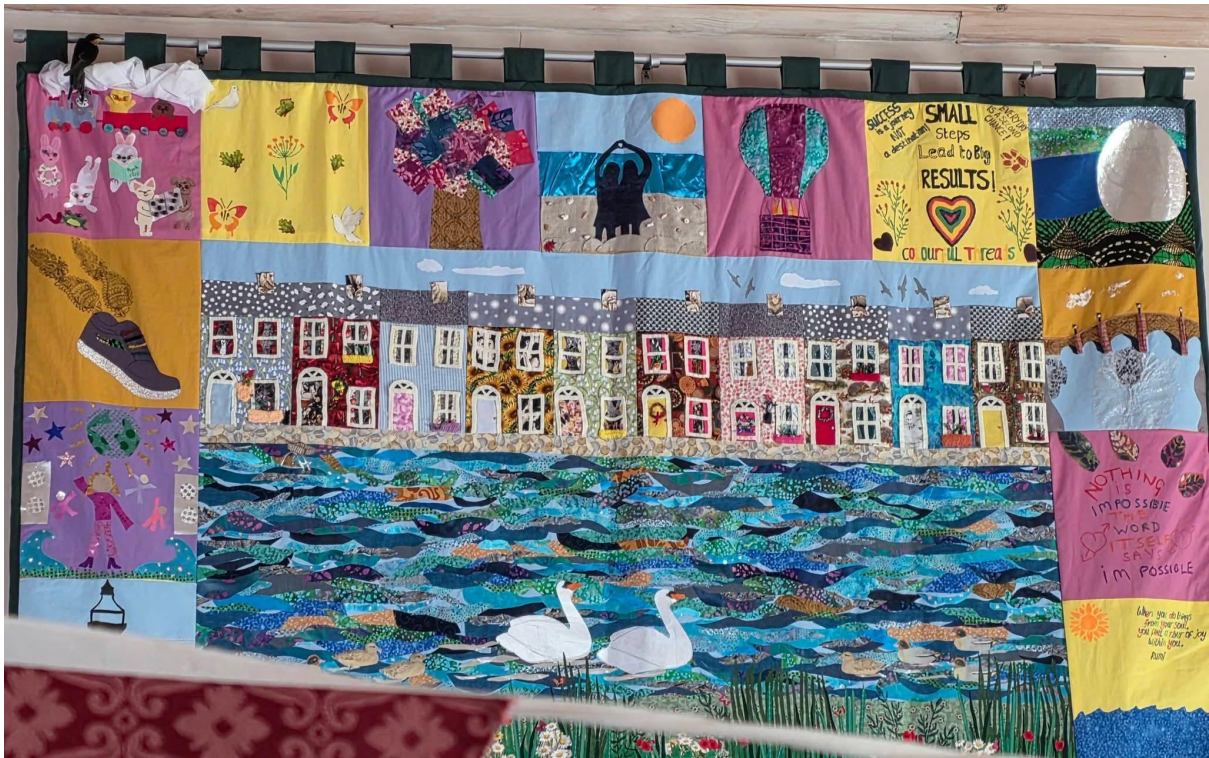
One of the lay leaders in the parish is a retired police officer who was in charge of the diversity programmes of Lancashire constabulary, and has served as interfaith advisor and coordinator for the diocese. His wife has taught English for speakers of other languages at the local FE college,

and both of them are involved as we are in with work among local asylum seekers and refugees, through the City of Sanctuary network. Another active church member had, before recent serious illness, been the leader of a major mission specialising in outreach to Muslims in the UK, and was well-known nationally as an author and conference speaker.

The last but one vicar who was in post for about seven years until 2023 and his wife had previously worked with a Christian mission in Pakistan, and could speak Urdu. They were deeply interested in building relationships with people of other faiths and sharing faith with them. They were able to build on the fact that over many years, Broadgate had been a positive example of good community cohesion bringing people together¹³. St Stephen's people were not afraid to talk with and befriend, Hindu and Muslim neighbours or to visit the other places of worship in the parish. I sense this is quite unusual for an evangelical Anglican parish.

The parish has promoted and taken part in a number of specific initiatives in crosscultural and interfaith activities. They were early participants in the [Faith trail promoted by Preston Forum of Faiths](#) hosting visits from school and other groups. On several occasions, the men of the church and the local mosque came together to eat food such as a Christmas dinner and to share conversations about faith. Women from the church on the mosques set up a holy books group where they met to talk about similarities and differences between the bible and the quran. Another cross cultural women's project is Colourful Threads, textile craft sessions which produced a tapestry depicting the neighbourhood.

¹³ My own research in 2004 involved interviewing some of the children who went to the local school.



St Stephen's has long had a minority of people of colour within its congregation including some of the Windrush generation and some interracial married couples. In recent years membership has become much more multicultural /intercultural. Significant numbers of Nigerians, Nepalis have joined the church. While several of them come to the regular Sunday morning services there is also a second Nigerian led service on a Sunday and Nepali service on a Saturday. These offer worship and fellowship in a familiar cultural style for these two groups. In addition to this, the growing diversity of the local population and the arrival of refugees and asylum seekers in the area means that other nationalities, such as Iranians, Indians and Namibians have linked to the church. The most recently appointed church warden is a Nigerian, while clergy ordained in Nigeria have been involved in the parish and now serve elsewhere in the diocese. Becoming a fully intercultural church is not always a straightforward journey. But slowly, progress is being made and there is growing understanding, respect and love.

St Stephen's has not been confronted so directly with poverty as St Matthew's was, and as a result not everyone in the congregation has a deep understanding or empathy with people who are struggling to get by

on benefits or a precarious low income. But the church has been involved in food provision with a weekly food market as well as a long-established lunch club for older people. Many sanctuary seekers and local people struggling with life on a low income attend and use the food market. The church has also been engaged for many years, with the local residents group and has recently developed an outreach based in a council owned open space and sports facility, in the poorer and more remote part of the parish. Activities based at “the Hut” include fun days and children's holiday clubs as well as a weekly drop in for a wide variety of local residents. Most sessions include a short pause for a Christian testimony or thought, and several participants have also joined a short Start course about the basics of being a Christian. A highly experienced community development pioneer has been employed part-time to manage the community development work at the Hut.

In summary St Stephen's shows many signs of functioning as a healthy urban parish church, maintaining a faithful Christian witness that is relevant to life in an ethnoreligiously diverse area, that also shows some evidence of inequality and poverty.

St Cuthberts

Finally I want to make mention of another local parish church in Preston that has made a significant impact on the lives of asylum seekers and refugees in Preston, St Cuthberts in Fulwood. It is a large and affluent evangelical church, drawing its congregation from the northern suburbs of the city and surrounding areas. It has an excellent suite of buildings which were completely reconstructed in 2005. At that point, the parish took a decision to make the buildings widely available to the local community and external voluntary organisations.

Involvement in support of refugees and asylum seekers began in about 2015 when asylum seekers were first settled by the Home Office in Preston. At the time, I was employed by Together Lancashire to support churches, developing their social action and had become aware of the new challenge of responding to sanctuary seekers. I discovered that the British Red Cross, who were the leading organisation working to support

asylum seekers in Preston had asked to use the main community hall for a weekly drop in and support session. I visited the drop in and became a connector between the Red Cross work and the church leadership. Over a number of months we discussed together how the church could become more actively involved as part of their community outreach. The conclusion was that there was an obvious need for informal English language classes that would supplement the formal ESOL courses offered by the colleges.

We helped train and equip the church congregation, members and other volunteers. We set up sessions led by Dave Smith, the evangelical founder of the Manchester based Boaz Trust and author of Christian books about refugees and asylum seekers. We also introduced the parish to the network of [Welcome Churches](#).

Volunteers were recruited from Saint Cuthberts and other local churches. A handful of them already had some experience in teaching English. Thus the Tuesday morning sessions of talk English were established and indeed continue to the present day. It is not unusual to have 30 or more students from a variety of national origins and educational levels on a Tuesday together with a dozen or more volunteers, most of whom are retired people, including my wife, Jane. The input from teachers needs to be flexible and often unstructured. The session usually finishes with a simple vegetarian meal cooked by volunteers from the church. The sessions have become social occasions where the students offer mutual support to each other. Some of the volunteers offer signposting advice, and advocacy about accessing statutory services. People with issues about their immigration status are generally referred to the Red Cross drop in, which meets in the same centre every Thursday morning.

Over the years, the Talk English users and volunteers have become much involved with the overall work of [Preston City of Sanctuary](#), the umbrella body, promoting hospitality and welcome across all sectors of the city. In consequence, St Cuthberts has become the preferred venue or most city of sanctuary activities and events such as those that take place during the annual refugee week. There have been several spin-offs. For example, City of Sanctuary's experts by experience group

has recruited most of its members from among Talk English service users. There has been a link to football sessions and in recent months a refugee running group and a refugee choir have been established.

While the parish of Saint Cuthberts continues to maintain and develop the usual wide range of activities associated with a large evangelical church, it has made a significant response to the resettlement needs of new arrivals in Preston from the Iranian, Afghan, Sudanese, Eritrean Ukrainian, Hong Kong Chinese communities. Some of the people who have received hospitality have become regular worshippers at the church.

Although I personally have not been deeply involved in the life and ministry of St Cuthberts, as someone who was involved in kick-starting their work, I feel very proud of what has been achieved.

Conclusions and reflections

Reflecting then, on this experience of 50 years in half a dozen urban church situations, what are we to learn about the priority and practices of ministry and mission? In the situations and decades through which I have lived I have described a constant intersection of economic disadvantage and ethno-religious diversity. Every church I belonged to in different denominations and with different sizes and resources needed to engage its complexity of context. That has also been the case when I worked with para church organisations and voluntary sector groups.

It doesn't seem to matter very much whether theological foundations of the local church are Catholic, evangelical or liberal. What seems more important is openness and developing an appropriate response with the people who live in the local community. It doesn't seem to matter whether the church has large congregations, superb or rundown buildings or talented high-flying leadership. The crucial thing seems to be a group of Christians who are committed to Jesus, to each other and

to the local community, to offer hospitality and not be shocked by or judgemental about the situations and people they encounter. They need to show love and patience and be willing to pray and work together for the shalom of their local neighbourhood.

The Five Marks of Mission for urban churches..

The **Five Marks of Mission** are a globally recognized framework defining the church's commitment to Christ's mission. They guide holistic ministry by balancing evangelism, spiritual growth, social justice, and environmental stewardship.¹⁴

Each of these takes on a distinctive shape in low-income, multi-ethnic neighbourhoods and need to be worked out empathetically with the local community context. All or each can be ignored, critiqued or subverted¹⁵ but I am using them here in the usual accepted sense and locating them in a framework that will be understood best by Evangelical churches.

Effective evangelism is unlikely to mean campaigns, which can be seen as invasions or raids by outsiders who parachute in and evacuate out of the local neighbourhood. The gospel message cannot be formulaic and concentrate purely on personal sins that make the listener feel guilty and unworthy. It needs to affirm the worth of every person and God's love for me, "just as I am". It needs to recognize that not every conversion or faith journey requires an instant decision or Damascus Road conversion experience. Often belonging precedes believing and believing precedes behaving as a respectable Christian. On the other hand it must not underestimate the reality of the need for repentance and forgiveness. Nor must it deny that the call is to people from every

¹⁴ [1, 2, 3] The Five Marks of Mission - The Anglican Communion Office
<https://share.google/D0bMYPC2xM21CsYr9>

¹⁵ See for example the work of Graham Adams' re-casting of the 5 Marks of Mission (in his brilliant book #HolyAnarchy).

And Al Barrett's radical recasting of them..

<https://thisestate.blogspot.com/search?q=marks+of+mission>

nation and to people of all faiths and none. Church growth is to be assessed, not simply by the number of bums on pews on a Sunday morning. In the unlikely event of large numerical growth issues of quality must be addressed. What we tell must be more than your soul will be saved and you'll go to heaven. The message of the Kin(g)dom¹⁶ is that is that God is already at work and ultimately, through Christ, all of creation will be redeemed and restored.

Discipleship and spiritual growth must be more than persuading people to pray and read their Bible on a daily basis and to attend church worship every Sunday. It needs to form disciples who can understand the community in which they live, engage with local people of all types, to recognize poverty, destitution and social injustice and to form followers of Jesus who recognize how their lives and personal story fits with the bigger story of the Kin(g)dom of God and the Missio Dei.

Churches have a duty **to offer pastoral care** to all people they encounter. The strength of the Anglican parish system, in theory at least, is that the incumbent has responsibility for “the cure of (all) souls” who are resident in the neighbourhood. In urban areas with the large numbers, the diversity and churn of populations, and the alienation of many people from the church it is an impossible task, especially if the burden falls on a single member of the clergy. Every urban parish really needs a team of committed people to share the ministry, (ordained and lay, paid and volunteered, ethnically diverse and interculturally aware, church members and helpers from other congregations, and people of “shalom” who are not necessarily Christian believers). But the principle is sound and everyone encountered deserves love and care. It includes where appropriate the offer of Christian ceremonies (christenings / dedications, weddings and funerals) when requested, and at minimal or no cost for people who are struggling financially. Love and care for the most vulnerable can be costly, both financially, emotionally and spiritually, but is an essential part of the cost of discipleship.

¹⁶ As some Christians have become somewhat uncomfortable with the feudal Lordship and Christendom model implied by the concept Kingdom, alternatives have been suggested, such as the “commonwealth of God,” The suggestion that “Kindom” is a close reflection of the teachings of Jesus is currently promoted by [the Urban Theology Union](#).

One cannot live and work in diverse low-income urban neighbourhoods without being confronted on a daily basis with the reality of **social inequality and injustice**. The poor quality of housing and the built environment is the first clue. The nature of shops, or lack of them, and community facilities, traffic and parking, quality of public transport, schools and health facilities give enough clues to place an area on the league tables of deprivation¹⁷, and the ethnic mix. Observing people on the streets, whether they are going about their everyday routines of work and shopping, shuffling along in slippers or scooting along on electric motorbikes or mobility scooters, hanging about on street corners or parks, doing illicit deals or hustles or sitting begging in shop doorways can provoke reactions of anger or passive acceptance of normality. The main point is that not all neighbourhoods are like this, and the ones that are desirable, where rich people choose to live, which may be a few miles away in affluent suburbs or commuter villages, are not like this.

Local urban churches cannot ignore such injustice. They sometimes have to be content with small local actions, such as advocacy and support for individuals who have been poorly served or treated unfairly by the authorities, or by lobbying local councils to make better decisions that impact local people. However, churches, particularly in larger denominations or by working together through organisations such as [Citizens UK](#) or [the Poverty Truth Network](#) can wield some influence on wider decision making. Individuals can engage in local politics, via political parties, single issue campaigns or civil society networks. Specialists may have ways of bringing issues to public attention by writing or media appearances or social media channels. The challenge is often to make robust arguments for justice, in ways and with language that does not antagonize and alienate people who think differently. Yet all the time we need to be aware that governments, economies, systems and structures are fallen and sometimes frankly malign in their opposition to justice and peace.

¹⁷ It is easy to see deprivation statistics at local level through the [Census mapping site of the Office of National Statistics](#), or analyse by parish boundaries [by the Church Urban Fund](#).

The final mark of mission is **Creation care**. Even in the most urban settings churches can respond to this issue locally and keep an eye open for global concerns. At the simplest level a local litter pick or planting of a wildflower bed can make a positive impact on a bleak environment. Churches who hold buildings or land can do more directly, [by signing up to the Eco Church Movement](#), developing responsible use of their space, for example to benefit nature and wildlife rather than car parking, and green energy approaches to heating and lighting, although some buildings require massive investment and have already consumed all the finances available from the congregation. Congregations can be exposed to theological education about responsible consumption and justice action in an era of climate crisis, and persuaded to “do their bit for the planet and future generations”. Links can be made with local and international environmental organisations such as [Lets Grow Preston](#), The [Wildlife Trusts](#) and [A Rocha](#). Some churches may be able to develop unused wild space in their locality for example as described by [Reuben Aspen in his Temple Tract about a Glasgow church](#). Others have developed a Forest Church approach in recasting their worship. In my experience it is sometimes more difficult in intercultural situations as some people in diaspora communities, especially if they have been influenced by Pentecostal teaching emanating from North America, seem particularly wedded to displaying their status and success by conspicuous consumption and driving large private cars as their only means of transport.

Ten commandments for urban ministry

To conclude I want to draw up a list of ten commandments for people engaged in urban ministry, either as local residents who feel committed to the place where they have lived for many years, (or even feel trapped in the locality) or as church leaders, paid staff or intentional long-term incomers. These are drawn from reflection on the five decades of experience I have written about, and what I have learned in listening to other practitioners. Significantly all the key words begin with Co-, Con-, or

Com, a prefix derived from the Latin word for with. The keynote idea is we need to be working with God and with other people.

1. **Context:** Understanding the local context and (sub) cultures is vital for anyone involved in urban ministry. Incomers should do a mapping exercise. A simple tool can be found on the [Proximity website](#). Walk round in a small group, praying as you go, take photos, make a map, listen to local people, and key people, note routes and barriers to movement, note what happens at different times of day, night, week, year. To understand the demography look at census maps online <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/maps/> tick the check boxes for age, ethnoreligious identity, housing type, employment, education.

Think what does the gospel look like here? How can we best connect with, involve and be guided by local residents? This is the first step for doing some [contextual theology](#).

2. **Continuation:** Stay a long time if God has called you to go or stay in a neighbourhood. Jeremiah 29:6-7 told the exiles in Babylon *Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity (Shalom) of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.* Two Temple Urban Tracts spell this out from personal experience: [Paul Keeble](#), who has lived and worked in Manchester, and [Sally Mann](#), who is the fourth generation of her family to have stayed working at the same church in East Ham. I first met my friend Neil in 1987 when he was a young pastor called as a pastor by a church in Salford and he hadn't a clue what to do. We talked about the need for long term commitment. For almost forty years he has faithfully served as minister in the same church and community and has seen God at work building a lively multi ethnic church that is engaged in the community.

3. Communication: The God of the Bible is portrayed as a divine communicator. God spoke and the universe was created, God has spoken through the prophets, the Word became flesh, and the good news was spread throughout the whole known world. But Christians have not always been very good at communicating, especially with working class and minority groups in urban areas. In a recent BBC radio Broadcast Gile Fraser referred to much Christian language as the "vernacular of Radio 3". Here are some key points:

- Use dialogue; two way communication, listen and speak WITH, don't talk AT people.
- Use simple jargon-free English for many or many urban people don't read or write much, while many have English as second or third language. Google translate can often be helpful, but be cautious about complex ideas as it is not always very helpful.
- Use concrete rather than abstract terms and (like Jesus) tell stories rather than writing essays.
- Cross cultural communication can be complex; it is not just about translation words and sentences, there are often cultural forms and assumptions, about body language, about who speaks first and what should be talked about or disclosed to strangers and officials.
- Use a simple version of Scripture such as the Good News Bible. Or use [Lumo](#) or other videos to present Scripture on screen. Some people will want to use Scripture translations in their mother language, but be aware some have archaic and complex wording, or be in the official national language rather than everyday dialects. Get expert advice if you can.
- Visual imagery can often communicate better than, or as a backup to words.
- Make what use you can of Social media, but be discerning about the content and moderate comments. Beware fake news and ranting which often goes viral more rapidly than wholesome content.
- Recommended ideas for adult Christian learning include Unlock materials <https://www.unlock-urban.org.uk/> and for Children <https://curbsproject.org.uk/>

- 4. Compassion:** In low income areas there is plenty of evidence of people in considerable distress and suffering. Low income and living in areas with multiple deprivation leads to poor health, shorter, harder lives, more likelihood of violence and addictions, and less chance of a high-quality education. Public services are often of a low standard. In such places Christians are going on many occasions to encounter people who are suffering and desperate for support. Some will present with immediate needs such as asking for food or money to feed their meter, others will have more complex needs or will have been defeated by their interactions with officialdom, especially when today's standard response is an instruction to go on a website. This can be extremely frustrating if it is written in formal complicated English, which may not be the user's first language, or there are technical glitches that prevent a successful completion of a form.

The Jesus of the gospels had many such encounters, with individuals and crowds and his heart went out in compassion. On one occasion he perceived them as sheep without a shepherd Matt 9;36., on another he wanted to gather them in like a mother hen with chicks. It is normal for us to make a similar emotional response. But wisdom also demands some discernment as to the best response. An instant fix may remove people from our line of sight, but engaging people in a local church linked community project, or accompanying (rather than signposting) someone to a professional specialist service may provide better long-term outcomes. Jesus also trained and enabled followers to do the work that he had done, and so should we. There are also times when outrage and organised lobbying of decision makers is needed. Social and political analysis is appropriate, focusing on the questions What causes poverty and who has the power to change things?

Compassion is not simply about giving help. Because sometimes this can trap people in victimhood. It can tend to condescend and

see people as powerless pawns, mainly meeting the need of the giver to feel good about themselves. A much better word is solidarity - standing alongside people. Paul Keeble expresses this well in his book [Mission With](#) as does Bob Holman in [Faith in the Poor](#).

5. Contribution

Even the poorest members of a church or community group have a contribution to make. Christians are familiar with **Luke 21 1-4** *As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. ² He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. ³ “Truly I tell you”, he said, “this poor widow has put in more than all the others. ⁴ All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.”*

Contribution includes, but is not only about finance but the offer to the church of time, care, practical and spiritual gifts and wisdom. In the St Matthew's congregation we had numerous cooks, people who prayed, single Mums who organized children's activities, a toddler group and a clothes swap shop, pensioners who looked after the building, a refugee with little English who set out chairs and tables and served the coffee, and an addict who shouted Alleluias and was the first to answer questions from the preacher.

Some unlikely people have leadership potential that has often been overlooked by a risk averse middle-class church. Thankfully there are an increasing number of training opportunities such as [Blackburn Dioceses's M Power course](#) and the [Formed training course from Jubilee +](#)

For community development work it is important to remember that low income neighbourhoods have many assets and lots of positive contributing people, organisations and public places. [Asset Based Community Development \(ABCD\)](#) is an approach which starts with and maximises those assets.

6. Community

Individualism is the most dangerous heresy of the present day. It comes from the enlightenment philosophy of the autonomous individual, and the market seeing us all as consumers. Evangelical Christians are prone to it, because we believe and promote a personal relationship with Jesus, we market the offer of the gospel, and often conform to affluent middle class cultural norms. There is a difference between personal and individual but too many of our songs are full of I, too many of our prayers me-centred. The Bible knows no such thing as a solitary Christian (John Wesley)

So, seek to build community and preserve it. It used to be strong in working class areas, and in ethnic minorities. We now see very divided and fragmented communities. Yet around the country churches are taking initiatives big and small to build community, for example through local summer programmes such as the one in [Streatham described here by Jon Kurht](#).

I sometimes use a group exercise to reflect on different modes of community. A circle of people facing inwards with arms linked and backs facing outward represent a close(d) community with strong bonding social capital. Turning people around so they face outwards, still with arms linked represents another form of strong bonding but with an aggressive face to outsiders. A third circle of people with unlinked arms represents an open community, close enough to each other to provide support, but with porous boundaries that allow outsiders to come in, to stay and join the circle or to pass through if the season has changed. It seems to me that the third model is the most appropriate for church in a low income ethno-religiously diverse setting.

The current focus on communities of identity raises a vital question. When we talk about us, who is WE? Too often Christians and the institutional church, and nationalists of various types, make lazy and unreflective assumptions about WE/US in a way

that excludes others, especially minorities, women, children, migrants and poor people. Indeed, sociologists use the term “othering” to describe this behaviour.

7. Commonwealth

The UK is one of the most unequal countries economically, and our western world has growing inequality. We hear of Musk the trillionaire, Bezos with an estimated net worth of approximately \$243.2 billion, concerns about [hedge fund money of a right wing Christian funding Church revitalisation work](#), and politicians receiving £5 million gifts from crypto currency tycoons. In real life we know full time working people on £15k a year, singles on universal credit, receiving less than £400 a month, social rented family houses costing £900 a month plus bills, and asylum seekers surviving on £40 a week plus bad accommodation. These inequalities, or more likely their impact, are likely to be found in your church congregations in urban areas...

So how do you read and apply the Scriptures, rather than just explain them away or ignore them¹⁸.?

[2 Corinthians 8:14](#)

At the present time your surplus is available for their need, so that their abundance may in turn meet your need, in order that there may be equality.

Acts 4:35 detailing the radical generosity of the early Christian church, where believers sold their properties and brought the proceeds to the apostles. The money was then "distributed to anyone who had need," ensuring no one in the community went without basic necessities

¹⁸ Rowland comments that right from the start

‘Christians could not easily live with the rigorous social ethics attributed to Jesus in the Gospels’, and lists a number of accommodations made in the first few centuries, though redistribution of wealth from rich to poor remained a strong characteristic until this too was compromised in the fourth and fifth centuries. Chris Rowland, *Radical Christianity* (Oxford: Polity, 1988) p.56.

[Matthew 19:21](#) Jesus said, “If you want to be complete, go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you will have treasure in heaven. And come follow me.”

8. Collaboration

Years of working in church and community have taught me that we need to collaborate and co-operate, work together with others, who may be from other church traditions, other faiths, secular organisations. It is for the good of the community and to show non-Christians that we may be weird but are not dangerous or harmful. It is surprisingly easy to find friends and allies committed to the common good beyond our own narrow Christian circles. There are people of Shalom to be found in Local Councils, in the secular voluntary sector and in other faith-based organisations. Sometimes we will disagree robustly, but it is usually possible to do this graciously and even if we cannot Christians are still called to love their enemies.

This collaboration is the work of the Kin(g)dom and preparing the ground for the gospel.

9. Convictions

As Christians we have convictions. Hopefully not criminal ones.. Though some in our churches and local communities will have offenders and ex-offenders among them and there are practicalities of dealing with these. There should be forgiveness and welcome, balanced with safeguarding rules and policies and attention to managing risk.

By convictions I mean strong beliefs, views, principles, moral standards (which we all fail to live up to). How do we manage these? Are they really Christian / Biblical views? Or just part of church, or class or national sub-culture? How do we stick with them, but do it graciously? Traditionally the main examples have

been Christian views on sex, alcohol, gambling, Islam, all of which will be real issues in low-income diverse urban communities.

For me the current hot button issue is about anti-racism. Having lived in multicultural contexts for all my adult life, and many of my friends and colleagues are now refugees or new migrants. For [50 years I have been an active anti racist](#). How can I talk honestly and graciously with people who vote Reform or are Christian nationalists, a position I see as heretical and idolatrous? [Helen Paynter has done some good thinking and writing](#) to help us in these areas and [Sally Mann with colleagues](#) has shown an example of how to engage.

10. Conversion

Most Christians want to see people become followers of Jesus, to believe the good news of his Kingdom, to repent and be “saved”. However, there are different views on what it might mean in practice and different ways of describing conversion (even in the New Testament - compare Peter, Paul, the various Marys, Timothy)

In a diverse low-income areas the evidence and meaning of conversion may take different forms. Acceptance and encouragement rather than moralising or making unrealistic demands is often needed. Some examples of people who have come to faith:

- Some couples who are living together will not be married, and one or both have professed faith. Churches can make limited demands for respectability when no one can afford a wedding, or there are children from earlier relationships, or the relationship is not an easy one with occasional violence.
- The young Hindu or Muslim guy who decides to follow Jesus dare not declare it publicly and be kicked out of the family.
- A woman with kids who is just about getting by on benefits gets some occasional cleaning work, paid cash in hand. If

she is going to be accepted in church does she have to stop breaking the rules? Is it any business of the church leaders?

- A care worker has to do Sunday shifts at least 3 weeks out of 4 or lose her job? Is she truly converted if she is rarely seen in church?
- Is there a place for censure or even church discipline if someone refuses to stop making racist remarks on social media and going on Tommy Robinson led marches to the nearby hotel that houses asylum seekers..?
- A whole family never turns up at worship because the kids cannot give up playing football on Sunday mornings?

So, what does conversion mean, including your own? Is your identity and belonging centred on Jesus, or on the local church or on the community in which you were raised or to which you are called? Is your believing firmly grounded in the revelation about the Kingdom of Christ as set out in the Bible and developed in the orthodox teachings of the historic church? Finally, is your behaving as a follower of Jesus much more than culturally conditioned respectability and being nice? Or has conversion led to transformation that at least tries to understand and copy each day what Jesus did, especially in terms of generosity, hospitality, social justice and solidarity with people who are marginalized and struggling with poverty in the neighbourhood around you and beyond.?

These ten themes have been known and almost become commonplace in discussion of urban ministry over the past fifty years. They would be relevant in any low-income community, whether or not it was ethnically diverse. And the issues around them repeatedly appear from FITC (1985) onwards to more recent books and strategies about mission in estates and left behind working class communities. But increasingly as more neighbourhoods become more diverse, a wider awareness and skill set is needed among church, leadership and mission teams. The response needs to be shaped by the local context but the themes need to be integrated and woven together for the decades to come.

***May the fire and cloudy pillar,
lead you all your journey through.***

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August 2024..Other Posts from the [faith and national identities project](#)