

Stepney Salvation Army: Bearing witness to the truth of Christ in a pluralistic globalised world.

In the last 50 years, unimaginable social change has taken place across the UK. It is now commonplace for competing cultures, rival religions and wide-ranging worldviews to rub shoulders on our streets. Alongside this explosion of diversity has been rapid decline in self-identifying Christians¹, the closure of churches (including Salvation Army corps), and Christian social service expressions that are finding it increasingly problematic to proclaim the truth of Christ in words.² Consequently, pluralism and globalisation are sometimes identified as negative features of the modern world that threaten the future and shape of the Church. It could be argued we are suffering from a crisis of confidence in bearing witness to the truth of Christ in the face of these social changes. In this paper I will suggest that whilst the context is challenging, the Church does have opportunities to bear witness to Christ in this new and fluid environment. To support this I will share part of the story of Stepney Salvation Army where I have ministered for 10 years. This is on the whole a story about growth not decline - where out of the ashes of a closed Salvation Army corps, a new and confident corps has emerged in one of the most diverse neighbourhoods in the UK.

The context: Tower Hamlets and Stepney Salvation Army

Stepney is in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. The 2011 Census revealed this about Tower Hamlets³:

- There were 254,100 residents.⁴
- The single largest ethnic group was Bangladeshi (32%) – around half of whom were born in the UK. The white British population (31%) has declined 6% since 2001. Country of birth data shows that 43% of people were born outside the UK with an increasing number of smaller ethnic groups in the resident population, most significantly from India, China, Somalia and EU countries.
- English was not the main language in 19% of the households.
- The Muslim population was 35% - the only borough in the UK where Muslims are the majority faith component. The 'no religion' grouping was 34% and the Christian population was 27% - the lowest in the UK.

Statistically, Tower Hamlets is a place of 'super diversity'⁵ – a term used to underline a level and kind of complexity surpassing anything previously experienced in a particular society. Such diversity is not uncommon in UK cities but there are particulars that are unique to Tower Hamlets. Whilst the census reveals facts about the community, one needs to take a closer look to identify what is happening 'between the lines'.

Here is an example of two households in Stepney:

¹ In the 2011 census 59% of people identify themselves as Christians. In 2001 it was 72%.

² The Lausanne Movement, 2011: *Cape Town Commitment IIA*, 2

³ Tower Hamlets Local Authority, 2013, *2011 Census: Second Release – Headline Analysis*

⁴ Tower Hamlets Local Authority, 2012, *Tower Hamlets Census Results – Research Briefing July 2012*

⁵ <http://www.mmg.mpg.de/research/all-projects/super-diversity/>

1. Syed⁶ is a 17 year old second-generation British Bangladeshi. He was born in the UK but both his parents were born in Bangladesh. His household consists of his parents, 3 brothers, a sister, paternal grandparents and a cousin recently arrived from Bangladesh. At home the family speak *Sylheti*⁷ but Syed speaks English at school and with his friends. Religion is taken seriously and Syed's grandfather prays at the local *Barelvi*⁸ mosque 5 times a day. Syed's father attends Friday prayers at the same mosque. Syed on the other hand spends an increasing amount of time at the large East London Mosque which adheres to a *Jama'at-i Islami*⁹ brand of Islam. In Bangladesh there is a volatile relationship between *Barelvi* and *Jama'at* Islam which is reflected in some tension between the generations in this household¹⁰. Syed attends our weekly football session.

2. Next door lives Sara who is a 9 year old of mixed heritage. Her father is Indian and her mother of white British and Sudanese parentage. She lives with her parents, her 2 brothers and quite often her uncles and aunts stay for indefinite periods. Her parents are now both Christians but her father was brought up a Hindu and her mother a Muslim and she has many Hindus and Muslims in her extended family. Hanging on the wall of the living room you will find a photo of Mecca that belonged to her grandfather alongside an embroidered hanging of the Lord's Prayer. Sara is a junior soldier.

The level of complexity in these examples is by no means unusual. Furthermore, away from the household there is evidence of the effects of globalisation and pluralism: Tower Hamlets politics are influenced by events in Bangladesh, as happened in the Tower Hamlets Mayoral contest in 2010¹¹; on the high street a Chinese supermarket opens up between the Bengali fish market and Polish grocery; in schools liberal secular and religious governors disagree on sex education delivery¹²; and on the streets recently, 'Muslim patrols' were accused of dividing communities¹³. In a pluralistic and globalised neighbourhood like Stepney, community life is 'messy', nuanced and fluid.¹⁴ The challenge for mission practitioners is to develop a missiology that can cope with such diversity and fluidity. This is what we have tried to do as we have planted Stepney Corps.

The 'planting' of Stepney Corps began in 2003. From the outset the emphasis has been on relationship building - relationship with God, relationship with others and relationship in the public square. A corps community has slowly emerged – each year gaining members, initiating new activities and widening the relational networks. Features of the corps include being:

⁶ Names used in this paper are not real.

⁷ Sylheti is the most common language of British Bangladeshis originating in the north east district of Sylhet and the area from which most British Bangladeshi have historical roots. It is a language in its own right but is similar to 'Bengali' or 'Bangla' which is spoken by 230 million people worldwide.

⁸ The first generation of Bangladeshis who came to Britain in the 1950s and 60s brought an Islam with them that was heavily influenced by the *Barelvi* tradition – itself influenced by Sufi or mystical Islam. Ed Husain, a Bangladeshi Muslim from Tower Hamlets vividly describes worship in the *Barelvi* tradition at Brick Lane Mosque in Husain, E., (2006) *The Islamist*, 11-14

⁹ *Jama'at-i-Islami* is an Islamist movement founded in Pakistan in 1941 and popular in Bangladesh.

¹⁰ According to Philip Lewis this is a common issue between generations in households with Bangladeshi and Pakistani roots - Lewis, P., (2007) *Young, British and Muslim*

¹¹ Qureshi, M., (2010) *Bangladeshi Village Politics in Tower Hamlets*

¹² Brooke, M., (2012) *Parents Fury at Sex Education in East Schools Plan Week of Protest*

¹³ Tower Hamlets Local Authority, (2013) *Council and Partners Condemn Vigilante Attacks*

¹⁴ A full discussion of the dynamic nature of Tower Hamlets communities can be found in Dench, G., Gavron K., and Young, M., (2006) *The New East End: Kinship, Race and Conflict*

- incarnational: membership is drawn almost entirely from Stepney - we are local and credible representatives of our neighbourhood.
- diverse: we engage with people from all walks of life and consequently are an example of Christ-centred pluralism and globalisation.
- inclusive: we seek to welcome in and include whoever we can.
- intentional: we seek to identify justice issues in our neighbourhood and to find ways to address them.
- reflective: at our centre is time prioritised for prayer, Bible study and theological reflection.
- Salvationist: we are proud that we are the closest corps to where the Salvation Army began and share the values of our forbears.

In a diverse neighbourhood holding relationship as the key value has proved to be an effective antidote to the 'dark side' of pluralism and globalisation. Taking time to build strong and healthy relationships has given us a voice and credibility in local issues, a role in overcoming divisions between competing groups and a starting place from which to break down stereotypes.

Four features of bearing witness to the truth of Christ in Stepney

Diversity:

Early on we realised that the credible and effective church in bearing witness to the truth of Christ in a diverse neighbourhood is the one that exemplifies it. Thankfully, the resources for underpinning a Christian theology of diversity and Christ-centred pluralism are rich.¹⁵ This way of thinking, however, is a challenge to long-held teaching and practice formed in a different context that prioritises homogenous church growth¹⁶. In a globalised, pluralist context the 'healthy church'¹⁷ is the diverse one. Bearing witness to the truth of Christ in Stepney demands us to demonstrate the Gospel is for people from every ethnic group, age group, religion, and socio-economic background. Here's an example of our diversity:

Every couple of months we host 'parties' as an opportunity to bring people together from across our programmes and community. Most recently we held our annual pancake party to mark the beginning of Lent. Whilst it wasn't a large gathering – around 60 people turned out – it was a remarkably diverse group. Present were the eclectic bunch who attend Sunday meetings who are from various nationalities and ethnicities – Romanian, Irish, Croatian, Indian, American, Chinese, Jamaican, White, Black and Asian British, those of mixed heritage and for this occasion were added a Bangladeshi Muslim family, a Russian family and a number of people who describe themselves as being of 'no faith'. The diversity was rich beyond ethnicity and culture extending to a wide-range of ages and socio-economic classes.

¹⁵ Good places to start are: Barnes, (2002) *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*; Hylton, (2009) *Crossing the Divide*; Newbiggin, (1989) *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*; Sudworth, (2007) *Distinctly Welcoming*

¹⁶ The Homogenous Unit Principle was coined by church growth founder Donald McGavran and best described in his book: McGavran, (1980) *Understanding Church Growth* 233-244. The theory holds that people are best reached with the gospel in people groups of like culture, language, customs and beliefs.

¹⁷ The 'church growth movement' has more recently focused on 'church health' as opposed to growth through Natural Church Development (NCD).

It is without fail that at these parties something 'sacred' takes place – a 'kingdom moment'. In the midst of the food, games, music, art and prayer opportunities I simply observed what was happening. I wondered where else in Stepney this Sunday morning, this week - this year even - such a diverse group was sharing the same space, eating and laughing together? It was simply beautiful and counter cultural – a radical alternative to the way life is usually conducted in our neighbourhood.

Inclusivity:

If diversity is an outward expression of bearing witness to Christ in a pluralistic globalised context then inclusivity is the intentional action that takes us there. There is, however, a tension between inclusivity and distinctiveness. Whilst we aim to include people we must guard against a relativism that becomes 'anything goes' and where the distinctive truth of Christ has no value.¹⁸ The way we have approached this tension is to develop an attitude of inclusivity that puts listening, hospitality, welcome, and open-endedness before talking, expectations on others to conform to belong, and working to preconceived outcomes. We have tried to maintain our distinctiveness by fostering an inclusive attitude that allows for diversity and belonging but is unambiguous and confident about the distinctiveness of the person of Jesus. Here's an example from the same party:

Towards the end of the party we presented a short talk about the meaning of Lent and the motivation for using this particular season to re-connect with God and to improve the lives of our neighbours. We gathered into a circle – Muslims, Christians, agnostics – and as the children played around us we offered one another the peace of Christ for the Lent season. I shook the hand of my Bangladeshi neighbour and wished him 'salaam'¹⁹. We talked briefly together about the nature of fasting – of Lent, Ramadan and Jesus' 40 day fast. This was a natural exchange between friends – mutual, honest and openly acknowledging our distinctive traditions.

Fast forward two weeks and I'm talking to the same Bangladeshi friend. Immediately he brings up the party and tells me how his two daughters, wife and sister enjoyed it. He asks how Lent is going. 'We must do this again', he says, 'but next time I'm going to bring my whole family!'

Shared truth:

A feature of modern Britain is the fragmentation in civil society that has led to a decline in institutions that can confidently represent groups of people. Whilst the Church has found itself pushed to the margins, it is still one of few institutions that can speak up as genuinely representative of people's views, since it gathers people and encourages membership. We have found this an opportunity to bear witness to the truth of Christ in regards to local justice issues. Interestingly in our pluralistic and globalised context we have found our views on social justice are often shared by institutions that are different to us. Furthermore, we have discovered when we speak out together with one diverse pluralistic voice our message has gained further credence. In this case pluralism and globalisation has not hindered but rather helped us to bear witness to the truth of Christ in a public way. This has been a strong element of our mission in Stepney as we have served the common good with others as distinctive followers of Christ. Here's an example:

¹⁸ For a good discussion of this and other tensions in a pluralistic context see Volf, (2011) *A Public Faith*, 80-97

¹⁹ *Salaam* is the Arabic word for 'peace' and is used as a greeting amongst Muslim people everywhere. The word also has a wider conceptual meaning of 'wholeness' similar to its Hebrew equivalent, *Shalom*.

I'm sitting in my Salvation Army uniform around the table with 18 other community leaders. This is a remarkably diverse group – there are differences across faith, culture, economics, ethnicity, class, age, education, gender. Despite this I could tell you everybody's name, what's brought them to the table and why they care passionately about a vision of justice, peace and human flourishing for this part of the city. I've spent time with each of them, one-to-one - sitting, sharing, listening and drinking coffee. It appears we have a lot in common – despite the obvious differences.

This day is shortly before the 2010 General Election and we're in the London Citizen's²⁰ office in Whitechapel waiting for David Cameron. He's not yet Prime Minister but he has the look of a PM in waiting. He's just spent half-an-hour walking around the Ocean Estate where I and 2 or 3 others around the table live. He later declared it to the press 'a failed project of New Labour' – something to do with the New Deal for Communities²¹ fiasco. Whilst he's worrying about that, we're more interested in presenting an alternative vision of the city. In our vision – 18 community leaders, representing in turn 1000s of others, can sit around a table in unity and present 5 clear and democratically agreed proposals for the flourishing of our East London neighbourhoods. Our vision includes a living wage, a scheme for providing safer streets, a way to provide genuinely affordable housing, an alternative to 'locking up' undocumented migrants and a simple solution to exploitative lending. We've spent years working together on this stuff and we reckon it works. For us this isn't 'policy', this is life – for our families, our friends, our congregations and our neighbours. And for me this an expression of bearing witness to the reign of God initiated through Christ.

Competing truth:

There are times when, despite our longing to be inclusive and serve the common good, we have to say 'no'. We have found some would co-opt us as partners when we simply cannot work to the same agenda. Others, despite our best efforts at being inclusive, are not content with our unambiguous views about Jesus and would like us to change. We then find ourselves at that awkward place where differences must be acknowledged and stated clearly. Of course if we genuinely want to bear witness to the truth of Christ as peacemakers, we need to find ways to maintain a respectful relationship that allows for difference and a way forward in dialogue. In a pluralistic globalised world developing a forum to deal with difference is paramount. Here's a story that my wife Kerry tells of one way she has tried to provide a safe place to deal with difference:

When my children started school, I was saddened to see at drop off and pick up time that parents stood in groups according to ethnicity and culture. So, in the playground groups of Bengali mums stood looking inwards, groups of Somali mums did the same, a group of more middle class mums stood in a closed circle and some working class mums did not even feel able to come in through the gates! I wanted to do something about this self-separation, so I started to stand in the 'wrong' part of the playground and just started chatting with different groups. Quite quickly I was accepted and was able to introduce mums of different backgrounds to each other. But I wanted to push it a bit further.

²⁰ London Citizens is a broad-based organisation that brings together churches, mosques and synagogues; schools, colleges and universities; unions, think-tanks and housing associations; GP surgeries, charities and migrant groups to work together for the common good.

²¹ The New Deal for Communities Programme was initiated by Tony Blair's Labour government in 1998 to regenerate England's most deprived areas.

I spoke to the Head teacher about starting a friendship group at the school. She was excited about the idea, so initially we gathered at the school or in a local cafe straight after dropping the children off on a Friday. But I wanted to push it a bit further. What I wanted to create was a friendship group that met in homes. The results from this very simple idea have been extraordinary. The group meets every week with different women offering to open up their home to others. Dozens of women and their families have been touched by this act of open, honest friendship. We take the time to ask questions about each other's faith and lifestyle in a non-threatening but often frank and real way.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our experience of bearing witness to the truth of Christ in a pluralistic and globalised context has consistently demanded us to make a choice. We discovered that in choosing to cross the boundaries of faith and culture, ethnicity and social status, a world in glorious technicolour has been exposed. The alternative of choosing to reach only people like us was a mono-chrome future we rejected. We discovered that in choosing to fling wide our arms in hospitality and welcome, new and wonderfully unexpected relationships emerged. The alternative of expecting uniformity and conformity was a sure way to stagnation and isolation. We discovered that in choosing to stand with others in truth, despite our differences, our effectiveness to witness to the truth of Christ was not diminished but in fact enhanced. The alternative of being a 'sole voice' would have had far less impact. We discovered that in choosing to explore truth in hopeful and faithful dialogue there have been fresh insights, dynamic new ways of thinking and creative output. The alternative of choosing only to stand our ground and do it all on our terms surely leads only to marginalisation and irrelevance. In a rapidly changing context, no doubt wherever any of us find ourselves in mission, such choices will always need to be made.

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