**Urban and Public Policy Discussion paper**

**Urban Mission and Theology (a south London perspective)**

**Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to outline the key themes for consideration in the context of urban mission and theology both in the Diocese of Southwark and the wider Christian community. The aim is to build on well established models of parish ministry and mission.

Whilst recognising that in the multi cultural milieu that is South London there must be recognition that change is a part of the dynamic that underpins the understanding of the role and contribution of the Church in serving both parish and the wider community. It is also important to note that London can be seen to be a nation within a nation\* due to its economic base.

In the book ‘What Makes a Good City’ Elaine Graham and Stephen Lowe write:

*“It is clear, however that the case for urban mission must be made anew to each generation”.*

If this is the case it also offers an opportunity to take note that there is an increasing commitment to urban mission across the theological spectrum. This is not to lose sight of the important work of the many groups which played an important role in promoting follow up to the ‘Faith in the City’ (1985).

It is important that commitment to urban mission and theological reflection is recognised as belonging to the whole Church not any particular theological tradition.

In giving consideration to urban mission and ministry the following are areas that can offer a space for reflection on:

* Issues arising from consideration of biblical and theological questions
* Celebration of pastoral outreach and parish ministry
* Regeneration – economic, physical and social
* Community partnerships
* Responding to social disadvantage
* A Sense of place
* The difference made by the churches involvement

In the different sections that follow reference is made to the specific issue of irregular migrants as an example of a social group that face particular problems within our urban communities. In recognising the needs of one social group it is important not to lose sight of the wider range of problems that are associated with poor housing and the decline of the infra structure, poverty and poor health. All of these problems and others need to be acknowledged and challenged in any consideration of urban ministry.

**Celebrating pastoral outreach and parish ministry**

In reflecting on the contribution of the Churches mission in any community the importance of the parish should not be underestimated. It is important that the traditional model of pastoral outreach is celebrated. The parish priest/incumbent remains one of the few people to both live and work within the community they serve. In the context of urban communities this is a factor that needs to be affirmed and its sustainability guaranteed.

The genius of Anglican tradition is a reminder that its commitment to the local community in the parish system ensures that everyone no matter what faith or none are in the care of a Christian community. The challenge is for parish clergy to be constantly mindful that they are parish priest to a whole community not a chaplain to the worshiping congregation.

The traditional contribution of both the parish priest and the congregation is worthy of celebration and it is a reminder that all disciples are called to a ministry of outreach however defined. The development of existing partnerships with theological training courses to encourage vocations to urban ministry should be encouraged and where it may have ceased to exist to be brought back to life.

**Regeneration – economic, physical and social**

The period between in the late 1980’s and the present has been one in which government’s have promoted and funded with millions of pounds regeneration projects. The wide range of work included funding for employment and business development schemes.

There are many examples of plans for the physical regeneration of communities in the Diocese of Southwark including the Elephant and Castle and Aylesbury estate in Southwark the Ferrier Estates in Greenwich, and the multi billion pound Battersea Power Station site in Wandsworth.

Over the next few years and especially whilst ever the country remains in a recession the expectation must be of less investment and major regeneration schemes being put on hold.

The few exceptions in the diocese will probably be in the Blackfriars and London Bridge area where the investment is being made by companies based in the middle and Far East. In addition the ‘Mayor’s Strategy’ for regeneration places a particular focus on specific areas including Croydon.

Even these proposals must be considered in the light of the financial downturn in the economy and the reality that major financial investment may not be forthcoming.

In the light of the withdrawal of investment there will be communities in which there will be a real sense of disappointment and possibly alienation. The residents having been led to believe that new and improved housing was going to become available will be left in conditions that are less than satisfactory for a good and healthy life.

The outcome may be apathy, though this may also lead to finding scapegoats such as irregular migrants who are resident in some of the poorer communities and a possible shift of attitude to supporting ‘far Right’ political parties. The decline in traditional voting patterns in some communities can be a response to the belief that those with power do not understand the needs of those who are living in less than ideal conditions.

The scape-goating of particular groups is on occasion related to the belief that where housing is regenerated that the new homes are unfairly occupied by residents who are not entitled to occupy them. It is important that where regeneration does bring benefits to the few that the local church contributes to encouraging the building up of a sense of community. The contribution of the local churches must be to offer support that is both pastoral and practical.

The pastoral element will be the traditional role of caring for anyone within the parish community who needs support. A listening ear and the ability to point people in the right direction to receive appropriate support remains at the heart of mission and ministry.

In responding to the decline in funding for social and community projects it is important that parishes are realistic about what is going to be possible. Since the mid 1980’s the emphasis on churches investing in new buildings for community use has been an important element of offering space for community services. In a changing environment it will be more appropriate for consideration to be given to more traditional models of social outreach, using available space creatively but with little financial cost.

The lack of financial input from national and local government could open up the possibilities for creative thinking within parishes and communities on new ways of offering outreach and support to parishioners. New ways of being church may best be developed by discovering the old ways of being church and adapting them for the present day.

The church south of the river responded to the last recession by creating a housing association run by the church to do the schemes others thought unviable. Now we need to think of the areas that again need a church response.

**Community partnerships**

A key element of any mission and outreach that addresses social and economic problems must be based on partnerships with local community groups. In seeking to meet the needs of residents it is important to recognise that whilst many may not have any religious affiliation that they can look to the local church for support.

The examples of good practice are to be found across the diocese and wider church be it work with the elderly, young people or harder to reach groups such as those who are in employment and who spend a good deal of their time outside of the home.

The tradition of clubs for both young and old are well established and it is important that this work continues. It is possible in many areas that working with other community based groups can lead to synergy in offering a service. A church community may not be able to identify sufficient volunteers but by working with other groups this problem can be overcome. It is important that in this context that the diocesan guidelines on Child Protection and Vulnerable Adults are followed.

The sharing of resources in this way can also be an example to local government of what faith communities can offer in meeting local social and community needs. A particular area for development is in the provision of advice on debt to those who are caught in a spiral of financial problems.

In addition in many parishes there are clergy and Christian volunteers ministering to migrants whose status may be illegal and therefore any support offered must recognise this and those offering a ministry be assisted to better understand the issues.

The contribution of the local church must not be undervalued in the delivery of community services, equally it may be necessary when considering parish development plans that consideration be given to assessing a local communities needs. The recently published review of the Index of Multiple Deprivation is an important resource for any review of the social needs of the residents of a parish.

The potential for partnerships cannot be underestimated and encouragement for their development is important. It also must be noted that in entering into these arrangements that the contribution of the local church is based on mission and outreach and whilst overt evangelism may not be appropriate the work is rooted in the sharing of the gospel message.

**Responding to social disadvantage**

In the light of the above it is important that clergy and regular worshipers are aware of the particular social needs of parishioners. Parishes in the most deprived communities will be made up of a diversity of individuals and families often representing many nationalities. A particular concern in many areas is that of irregular migrants who in many cases live in a hinterland between established communities and the possibility of facing the legal challenge to their being in the community/country.

The specific issue of migrants is highlighted in the continuous changes in policy made by the government. In every case the changes lead to greater hardships for irregular migrants and the growth in the number who are living on or below the poverty line. The local church is often the main centre of support. The support being more than the practical assistance of food and other much needed necessities, it is also the contribution of offering a space where the migrant feels welcome and safe. The parish priest may be one of the few people they can trust with their ‘story’ which is often harrowing in the extreme. The congregation can also be a group that absorbs into its life people who need to believe that they are accepted.

The pastoral mission of the Christian community in this context is clear and costs very little in financial terms but is of immense importance emotionally for both those who receive and those who give.

In addition the issue of migrants who can face refusal of the right to remain and therefore live in fear even though they may be in employment and be parents to children who are in school. The local church is again often a place where they feel welcome and can find a sense of community and a place of safety.

It is important that links are established with campaigning bodies that can offer support and guidance on how to identify appropriate legal advice. An additional issue is that of the role of the clergy and volunteers in this context who may be the recipients of confidences that if shared with statutory agencies can have a negative effect on the lives of the migrants who are caught in a legal limbo.

The political arguments on the place of migrants within society and the constant argument about how to ensure that they do not receive special treatment contributes to debates that are based on misinformation.

The wider dimensions of social disadvantage are also important and consideration must be given to a constant updating of information on the particular social needs of individuals and families within parishes. The growth in the number of Food banks serving local communities is indicative of both a real need and of Churches finding a model of social action.

Another area for consideration is that of working with young people who can be caught up in the world of ‘gangs’ and ‘youth crime. ’ The problems of a culture where knives and guns are a given within a social group the identification of projects to combat the underlying reasons at to why young people feel it is important to be a part of the culture.

The potential for shared projects and work to combat social disadvantage may be found in partnerships within deaneries and within ecumenical networks. The possibility of a shared commitment of several churches in meeting social disadvantage could be explored within many areas.

The problems associated with young people identified above offers an opportunity for the exploration of partnerships with Majority Independent Black Churches who in many cases rent established church buildings for their services.

**A sense of place**

A key element of any discussion of urban mission and ministry is a focus on the sense of place and belonging. The theological idea of place is central to the teaching of both the Old and New Testament; the early Israelites were seeking a land and in the centuries since the understanding of place has remained a central theme to the Christian understanding of being part of a community both of a fellowship of believers and belonging to the community that is home.

In a multi cultural society where movement and constant change are part of everyday life the importance of belonging and place need to be promoted. It is through the sense of place that people can work for the creation of sustainable communities. The church in its buildings and people can make an important contribution to this element of people living together in community.

A particular concern must be support for ministry on ‘outer estates’ in these communities such as New Addington in the London Borough of Croydon or Bellingham in Lewisham it is possible for residents to feel isolated. The feelings of isolation that is sometimes felt by residents can become a breeding ground for the activities of far right political parties that feed on perceived isolation from the wider community.

The sense of place needs to be encouraged and affirmed in these communities and opportunities identified to challenge the negative perceptions of both residents and the wider community.

**The difference of the Churches involvement**

As highlighted earlier the people interested in the inner city and the excluded have all got agendas. The church does to, to be relevant to a changing society but we must both be honest about this and show that inspires us rather than constrains us.

Housing associations are caught in a dilemma not to produce environments that are difficult to manage, the local authority similarly knows it gets more funding and votes by cleansing an area than it does showing it as a ‘problem’. The developers are interested in unearthing the new area that will produce profit for them.

In this context the concept of gentrification is all important; communities that traditionally housed the poorest areas transformed into housing that is only available to those with higher incomes.

The Christian witness is responding to the need without agenda, without bias, and with love. This may sound naive but it is truly the different approach and it is relevant to those in the marginal areas who either do not represent themselves or do it badly.

The example of the parish responding to its community by being engaged happens less often than might be exepected. What is therefore needed is a resource that can help the PCC or Vicar to feel able to understand the options and the choices and to be on the side of their parishioners.

**Conclusion**

The importance of the Church in urban communities cannot be underestimated. The parish system offers a well established model for offering sustainable mission and ministry to the diversity of communities that are found in South London. One of the keys to any development is to ensure that the relationships are built on trust and mutual understanding.

The history of urban mission in South London is one of outreach and commitment that can underpin future thinking. Opportunities for different theological traditions to reimagine urban mission may be the way forward. The telling of individual and parish stories can be encouraging to both the listener and the story teller. In seeking to offer support and care to individuals and families across South London the Church can draw on many examples of good practice. In looking forward it is important that there is space for the sharing of good practice and ideas.

In addition opportunities must be offered for theological reflection. The growth of ‘public theology’ offers an opportunity for conversations that explore the relationship of mission and ministry that reflect the everyday reality of working with a wide ranging group of partners. These will include public authorities, other Christian communities and representatives of other faith communities.

The challenge we face is to be open to new ideas and the recovery of past good practice that served communities well.

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\*Thanks to Francis Davis for the concept of a Nation within a nation.