

Mapping Urban Mission

Erica Dunmow started work as Urban Mission Development Advisor for a joint project between the Evangelical Coalition for Urban Mission and the Methodist Church on 1 September 2004. These are her initial thoughts.

Newly in post, it is early days for me to map out a strategic plan for what the job is about — there is more listening and looking to do first — but perhaps I can share with you something of my background and how it influences my vision for the work.

I grew up in a nondescript interwar suburb in Southeast London (although it had started off as Kent), and after a spell in relative spaciousness in East Anglia, I have lived and worshipped in what are now called Urban Priority Areas for the last twenty-five years. Although I've served as a Methodist Local Preacher for twenty of those, my local church involvement has always been ecumenical — always with Anglicans, but also with Baptists, URs and RCs. I chaired the Local Ecumenical Partnership Council on the Manor Estate in Sheffield for over five years and one of my aims was to enable us to understand and value our different traditions.

At one of our most moving meetings I invited people in pairs just to share what Eucharist/Communion/the Lord's Supper/Mass meant for them in their worship life and their relationship to God, without using any technical liturgical terms, and then people said just a little of what they'd shared with the whole group. What came through very clearly was whether Communion was at least once a week and maybe daily, or maybe only once a month, whatever our tradition, it was a profoundly important part of being a Christian. Many of us also said how painful it was that we could not, as a group that included RCs, share Communion with each other. We had to recognise the reality of our differences, but I developed a liturgy of sharing a big celebration cake during our LEP anniversary services as a symbol of that more solemn feast that we couldn't yet share. Whilst recognising difference we were also making connections and building fellowship and as

the RC priest said: "doing what we could together". I find the model of Covenant helpful. Two or more bodies agree that they will travel together and be committed to taking the other into consideration in all that they do, but not necessarily doing everything together.

Urban areas are ones where there is often an incredible diversity of inhabitants. There are only 13 households in the street in Darnall, Sheffield where I now live. We consist of five white Sheffielder families and the rest are incomers — four from Pakistan, one from India, one Jamaican, and two from London.

We number two school teachers and quite a number of school children, a redundant toolworker now handiman, a care assistant, a tax consultant, a bus driver, a taxi-owner-driver and a bus maintenance worker, various housewives, 'job-seekers' and pensioners, our local housebreaker!! (thankfully on the relatively straight at the moment) and a retired local government officer. Some of us have been to university, some have never been to school. Some of us are Christian, Hindu, Moslem (one a proud Hajii who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca, as the sign on his house declares) or atheist (and quite definitely so!).

These matters could be a cause of division and suspicion, but we are all concerned about the drug dealers in the Park at the end of the street, the local schools, what will happen now that our local supermarket has moved to a big 'out of town' site with no bus service, and we chat over the hedges about encroaching bindweed and children. I am lucky that although the area is seen as 'the wrong side of town' by estate agents we are relatively well off and ready to be good neighbours and we share together what it makes sense to share.

I live on a bus route that connects the east and west sides of the city, and if I ever travelled from end to end, I would be sharing it with an even bigger economic and social range of people. If there is an accident on the route one side of the city (as there was this morning) it causes delays which affect the people waiting at the stops on the other. That bus does what church at best does — connects us and carries our varied selves on the journey of faith — and we lose our life-changing hope if ever we feel that being a Christian should insulate us from the challenges and frustrations of living in consideration and respect for

others whose lives are ostensibly different from ours.

I give these three snapshots because what I think I will be doing in the Urban Mission post is encouraging the churches and other Christian organisations to see each other in the same light as we did on in the Manor LEP. Churches and mission and service projects are bodies worshipping God and engaged in the same enterprise to grow God's kingdom, although we have our different emphases and approaches to that.

I will be encouraging the projects and churches to view the secular and other faith organisations in their communities as good neighbours whom it makes sense to work with on issues that affect our common lives as human beings. We must also recognise our inter-relatedness to other parts of our towns and cities, and not ignore the stockbroker belts, respectable 'burbs, 'metropolitans' and nightclubbers.

In my work life, I have variously been a local volunteer co-ordinator, national development worker for Student Community Action, Assistant Director of the National Association of Councils for Voluntary Service, and Director of a Community Foundation. In those roles I have often been part of developing policy and being an advocate of the voluntary sector to statutory and business bodies. Likewise, this post should be about ensuring that the Christian perspective locally and nationally has effective influence on decision-makers.

Our core Christian event, gathering prayerfully and joyfully around the Lord's Table to share a simple, yet unique meal, is a humbling, empowering and egalitarian one. The conversations that can happen between the people who share that meal are between people who are equal inheritors of God's Kingdom who should be freed from the need to defend and divide through prejudice or greed, freed to praise and worship together. Likewise our vision in urban mission should be to create a whole city as a symbol of the risen, healed body of Christ.

Erica Dunmow

Contact ECUM for more information.

URBAN FORUM

'Urban Spirituality' was the theme of this year's Forum, jointly sponsored by ECUM, Urban Bulletin and the Ecumenical Urban Officers' Group, held on March 20th at Rye Lane Chapel, Peckham. There were 44 participants who explored the nature of belief, meaning and identity in cosmopolitan cities. Rev. Dr. Toby Howarth, Vice Principal of Crowthor Hall opened up with the theme of human spirituality originating in God's creation of humankind in his own image. Workshops either side of lunch explored different dimensions of spirituality encountered in urban ministry.

- Urban Children Spirituality led by Kathryn Copey of the CURBS Project

- An Urban Bible led by Bishop Roger Sainsbury
- Interfaith Encounters led by Rev Chris Beales of Employment Forum UK
- Asian Spirituality led by Alan Sharpe & Tom Chacho of Urban Vision
- Spirituality of Black Youth led by Jacqui Henry & two young people from Jump
- Congregational worship led by Rev John Oliver
- Spirituality of Non-black Youth led by Michael Eastman.

The final session, chaired by Roy Dorey, Chair for the day, explored the question of how to engage in and develop multi-cultural worship and how we celebrate Christian unity and Christian diversity in urban congregations. A second issue was how Christian encounters with other faiths are affected by radical Islam. The link between spirituality and suffering in Christian experience was suggested as a

better starting point for dialogue than competing truth claims. A third area was the contrast between approaches to spirituality which emphasise feeling good and achievement with those of experiencing powerlessness on the margins. Our Christian understanding through Jesus is of God's presence in failure and suffering and His transforming purpose through resurrection.

The day brought sharply into focus the areas where faith communities can co-operate and those where there is conflict. These issues will become a growingly significant dimension of urban mission in the UK.

Michael Eastman