

REMEMBERING THE RT. REV. LORD SHEPPARD OF LIVERPOOL 1929 — 2005

DAVID SHEPPARD: EAST LONDON 1958-1969

It is a half a lifetime ago but it was a significant and germinal time for a man and a movement. The man came to the Mayflower in Canning Town and the movement was Urban Mission.

The first time I met him was at my own arrival at the then West Ham Central Mission in 1965. He slid quietly into the back row of the Baptist church, introduced himself after the service and invited me down to the Mayflower.

There I found a large and formidable team. George Burton, Brian Seaman, Rosemary Finch, Jean Lodge Patch and others were working alongside David and Grace Sheppard who lived in a small flat at the centre of the sprawling complex of the former Malvern College Settlement. 24 young volunteers were also residential, part-time helpers in the developing work.

More importantly I discovered that the longstanding failure of evangelism within the working class had been bridged. Local, working class young adults were gathering in the Sunday group, becoming believers and forming a new church. They were a vivid, lively, indigenous group.

Social concern was evident on site with the nursery school, youth club, and community activities. And soon I was invited to join a key group of industrialists, teachers, social workers, and doctors convened by David to face the rapidly changing urban scene that followed the closure of the docks. Research and reflection became crucial. It came alive when an early morning explosion in the tower block Ronan Point in 1968 drew many of us together to work with the police and local authority. A broadcast service was scheduled to go out that weekend from Mayflower and I remember the urgent re-jigging of the service.

The 60's was the decade of emerging urban mission concern and Mayflower was the gathering point of youth workers, ministers and clergy and evangelists. Frontier Youth Trust, Evangelical Urban Training Project (Unlock) and Christians in Industrial Areas (precursor of this Bulletin) all stem back to David Sheppard.

And time and again his writing rooted back to the earthiness and struggle of the East London experience. 'Built as a City' (God and the Urban World Today) used West Ham as the context for learning. Mayflower was the diving board for Woolwich, Liverpool and Faith in the City.

When David became Bishop of Woolwich he arranged a day long review of his time at Mayflower. We sat in a suburban home and worked carefully and prayerfully through all the development and stories. One sobering conclusion emerged from the welter of strategies, experiments, programmes, effort and achievement. Over

the 11 years it had taken one and a half fulltime workers working for a year required to produce one working class convert! That is the measure of our missionary failure.

David Sheppard did much for East London but East London did more for David Sheppard. He was challenged, shaped and changed by his years here. This placed him at the heart of the wave of urban mission that rolled across the UK in the 80's and 90's.

I am personally indebted to David for opening my eyes, encouraging commitment and introducing me to the individuals and groups who came together across the denominations and theologies to 'seek the shalom of the city'. That task is unfinished.

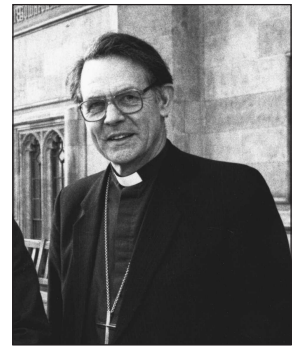
The London Borough of the 60's is not the same today. More than 60% of the population is black and globalisation has run alongside regeneration to dramatically change the face of the urban. Pentecostalism and Islam are now the faith flows and Mayflower has become the River Church as the local Elim congregation merged with the Mayflower congregation. But the closing words of Matthew's Gospel remain our mandate and the central words of Luke 4 are still the manifesto.

Revd. Colin Marchant

A Good Man of Generous and Gentle Spirit

I met David on 17th March 1962 (the day his daughter Jenny was born). I had just started my ordination training in London. I was in theological turmoil. Before College my wife and I had done a work placement in Liverpool's Toxteth; sadly in the grip of severe deprivation. This traumatic exposure to the joys and sorrows of Toxteth had refocused our lives: an earlier call to missionary work overseas was redirected to the inner city. News of David's innovative work in urban mission and ministry at the Mayflower Centre attracted me to visit him.

I met David again at a conference for young evangelical Anglican clergy at Swanwick in about 1966. The theological turbulence in inner city parishes was gathering momentum. At a late night impromptu session an impatient, dissatisfied and increasingly angry mood spilled over. The old platitudes of traditional evangelicalism no longer 'scratched where inner city people itched'! We needed new wine (news) for the new wine skins (contexts) for our work. We faced new questions. We had no theology to match this new situation. We wanted action and we wanted change. 'Christians in Industrial Areas Correspondence' a network of research and study was launched. David took the lead. It proved to be seminal over the next decade as did the leadership he offered.



David Sheppard's campaign/prophetic ministry in the Church was taking off. Soon three initiatives galvanised: the highly innovative local ordained ministry project at Bethnal Green; the Frontier Youth Trust (an offshoot of the Scripture Union), to develop new approaches to work with 'unclubable young people as had been emerging at the Mayflower, and a little later the Evangelical Urban Training Project (Unlock) was set up to provide appropriate training, empowerment and indigenisation of inner city congregations; most then in the grip of imported leadership from middleclass, and professional leaders which had failed to achieve any effective renewal there. I had the privilege of being appointed as the first Project Officer of EUTP in 1974.

David had gathered representative leaders to rewrite the mission and ministry agenda for the urban communities so that their own voice could be articulated, their untapped resources released, and their proclamation of the Kingdom of God in their own tongue, culture and context could be announced.

During this significant period David was 'coming to a new critical awareness' of the Church's role in urban Britain'. David with his new allies were rediscovering new truths and principles to drive urban mission and ministry forward. Scripture had to be released from the grip of middleclass, and decontextualised interpretation. The centrality of the Kingdom and of the place of the poor had to be rediscovered. Mission as an activity of God was world and not church centred (... he always told his clergy 'play the world with your strong hand and play the church with your weak!'). God reveals Himself/Herself in all peoples and cultures. 'Salvation' is concerned with the whole person and her context within the totality of humanity. It is wrong to split spiritual from social or person from corporate.

Given the nature of the Church of England it was inevitable with his cultural academic and sporting pedigree that David would be called to be a Bishop. I have long held the view, however, that this role in Church and Society did not deploy his gifts to their best potential.

Episcopacy is a strange theological mutation especially within the Church of England. Within the English context it has embraced feudal autocracy unhealthily. Such episcopacy is in serious conflict with the Kingdom value and priority of 'leadership as servanthood'.