



Faithful Cities **SUMMARY**

A call for celebration, vision and justice

Introducing the report from the Commission on Urban Life and Faith

All change...

Twenty years ago a report from the Church of England, *Faith in the City*, ignited a wide-ranging political debate on urban life in 1980s Britain.

As well as turning a powerful spotlight on the plight of urban Britain at the tail end of the 20th century, its most striking legacy has been the Church Urban Fund, which continues to invest millions annually in vital grassroots projects in the poorest urban communities.

But so much has changed in 20 years.

Our cities have been transformed - not just the way they look, but the people who live in them.

Today our cities and towns are home to a religious and cultural diversity that was unimaginable 20 years ago - and yet the extremes of poverty and prosperity are not so different. Multi-million pound regeneration schemes and the dramatic impact of globalization have brought riches and new opportunities to many localities. But at the same time this growth has forced many people to the margins, and dramatized the gap between the super rich and the poorest. This widening economic gulf, combined with the rapidly increasing ethnic and cultural diversity of urban areas, has also heightened fear of the stranger and fomented suspicion and distrust.

The Christian tradition celebrates the potential of the city as a home to thriving, healthy human communities. But it also recognizes that this vision is a long way off, and that Christians are called to play a part in bringing it closer.

Between 2004 and 2006, the Church embarked on a new inquiry into urban life in light of the changed world in British cities. **The Commission on Urban Life and Faith (CULF)** set out to examine progress made in improving life for people in our cities and to see what impact factors like deindustrialisation and globalization are having for urban citizens.

The report sets out to reflect on the challenge God is making to Church and nation and to come up with a vision for urban society in which the Church and other faith communities play a vital, central role. The recommendations are based on the need to nurture the wellbeing of citizens, and call people of faith to engage with all that makes life flourish. ***Faithful Cities: A call for celebration, vision and justice*** is the result of two years of study and fact-finding, of hundreds of meetings and conversations and of considerable reflection. The report argues that there is more to life than economic and cultural regeneration, and that the wellbeing and renewal of our cities must be grounded in a vision of justice and human dignity.

This leaflet summarizes the report and the key recommendations.

In good faith

Religious faith is one of the richest and most enduring sources of dynamism and hope for cities and what is said in the report grows out of **three faith-ful convictions:**

- That God is source of all life and from whom all creation draws its purpose and character.
- That to be human means that we are all made 'in the image and likeness of God', and that therefore each of us has an innate and irreducible dignity.
- That our traditions call us into relationship with God because human purpose is fulfilled in lives of mutuality, love and justice.

It is because people of faith are instructed to 'practice what they preach' that their religion is not abstract but practical - which can mean anything from running clubs for teenagers, offering shelter for homeless people, advising those looking for work or providing meals for senior citizens.

At their best, churches - alongside those of other faiths - offer a particular gift to communities, something our report calls 'faithful capital'. It is a development of the idea of 'social capital' an idea used by social theorists to express the way in which people are enriched not only by what they have or what they can do but by their web of social relationships and their participation in civic life.

The Christian tradition is not alone among the faiths in nurturing a 'moral sense' in people, encouraging commitment to:

- Personal and collective transformation.
- Love for neighbour.
- Care for 'the stranger'.
- Human dignity and social justice.

And the Commission has identified the powerful influence of faithful capital in the long-term, presence of people and networks of faith in our most deprived urban areas. No doubt because of its parish system, the Church of England in particular, is home to buildings and networks of people dedicated to the long-term service of the local urban neighbourhood.

Not only are faith communities in our cities physically present, they are actively, dutifully and, sometimes passionately, engaged in caring and campaigning for those who need care most - sometimes people whom wider 'society' has forgotten.

From the government's point of view, this social and faithful capital can be seen as both a valuable resource and a source of discomfort. On the one hand, they offer paths to the grails of 'community cohesion' and urban 'regeneration'. On the other, the distinct and conflicting language of faith, the values that challenge rather than support government policy, and working styles that fail to mesh with time-limited, benchmark-driven, outcome-required government schemes can pose a huge challenge.

Vive la différence!

In our ethnically and socially diverse cities, fear of 'the other' can stalk the streets, and both rich and poor are tempted to ghetto-ize. Against this background, conventional wisdom reaches optimistically for a spirit of 'tolerance'. In fact, the ancient traditions of faith suggest that tolerance will not do - that tolerance has a tendency to be passive and paternalistic. Instead the Christian faith, calls for acts of hospitality - a spirit which extends beyond the comfortable boundaries of nationality, ethnicity, creed, gender or class.

And while recognising that urban Britain can harbour polarisation and rejection of 'the other' both by extreme religious groups and racist networks, *Faithful Cities* argues that in contrast faithful communities can be the seedbed of a positive celebration of diversity if faith is expressed as a source of solidarity and hospitality, if faith in practice means that 'strangers' become neighbours.

Mind the gap

The experience of the faithful on the ground is that the poor are the losers in a widening prosperity gulf. We live in one of the most economically unequal countries in Europe and not only has the 'trickle down' promise of market forces failed to deliver but a draconian asylum system consigns a small section of the population to unacceptable destitution.

- The British economy from 1950 to the present has grown 2.5% a year.
- We have the lowest unemployment for 30 years.
- In 2003-04, the income of the top fifth of UK households was 17 times greater than that of the bottom fifth.
- The further away from London the further the gap widens between poor urban areas and rich ones.
- 8 million (15%) of our fellow citizens live in the 10% of the poorest wards in the country.

On the Meadowell estate in North Shields, 87% of households were paying doorstep lenders an average of 33.5% of their total weekly income. Families were paying £66 per week out of a total income of £200. Single people had to find £27 out of a total of £82. Interest rates ranged from 33% to 2000%.

A key concern raised by the Commission is whether our society is being run for the benefit of the rich, or for all its members. Countering social inequality, and trying to reduce it, is the litmus test of a society's moral adequacy.

But there is a deeper question about our reliance on market driven capitalism than simply questioning its role in promoting inequality. It is time to ask whether this economic and social model can really deliver happiness or wellbeing for all.

Why, the report asks, is it that young people in Britain, the fourth largest economy in the world, are among the most depressed in Europe? Why is it that despite year after year of economic growth, as a society we are no happier?

The answer may be found in the growing recognition that factors beyond material wealth are essential for human happiness. We need:

- Fulfilled and secure relations in personal life.
- Relations that spread beyond the personal to create good community life and relationships.
- Good health, especially mental health.
- Freedom, including the scope to participate in matters affecting ones' life.
- A philosophy of life, faith or worldview which , includes a commitment to something beyond serving one's individual needs.

The regeneration game

In the past decade a multi-billion pound urban 'regeneration' industry has become a driving force behind cultural, environmental, retail, leisure, and housing development in urban Britain. As property prices soar, it is often sold as bringing dynamism and new resources to jaded and disadvantaged urban districts. Yet too often little notice is taken of the poorest people in these areas who often find themselves forced out, stranded, and barely regenerated at all.

This can be seen in city centres where new residents fill *state of the art* apartment blocks and in buildings adjacent to tidal and non-tidal waterways. The Commission raises concerns about how new urban communities are developed in the expansion areas of southeast England.

Religious groups are increasingly recognised in government and local authority policy - which in the way this offers a voice to poor communities is a promising move. However, too often this recognition involves groups being co-opted into a grander scheme - or find themselves overwhelmed and powerless in the face of the myriad demands made of them. This kind of top-down imperative to 'listen' to local communities can lead to cynicism on the part of public servants, and to disillusion amongst community leaders, service users and citizens - something our commission came across time and again. People from congregations and church organisations who had engaged, in good faith, with statutory bodies and municipal authorities believed that the promise of citizens having influence and some power in the governance of their neighbourhoods and cities has been broken. We need ways in which faith communities can make a distinctive and effective contribution to the public life of urban areas that is:

- Authentic to their primary mission and ministry
- Able to deliver real improvements to people's lives.

Members and leaders of urban faith congregations speak with real authority about the problems of urban Britain. Those who attend churches, mosques and temples are people who struggle with those problems every day. Invitations to join partnerships for regeneration can be an opportunity to offer a critical solidarity, as Christians, alongside those of other faiths, to live in the hope and possibility of change and regeneration.

In particular, our task is to highlight the plight of the poor and the disadvantaged, and to work towards building a world where poverty is history. In this mission we are committed - glad in fact - to work hand-in-hand with anyone who will share those objectives. Nevertheless, faithfulness demands a critical rather than a docile partnership with the agencies of regeneration and development whoever they might be.

Acting in good faith

Faith-based organisations make a decisive and positive difference to their neighbourhoods but, if this distinctive contribution is to grow then mainstream churches must invest more energetically.

We call upon the Church of England and other denominations to make a fierce commitment to staying in the urban communities of our nation and to contribute in every way possible to the flourishing of our cities. We want people of faith to contribute their distinctive values in nurturing a physical and spiritual environment which makes a good city and which promotes the deep wellbeing of its citizens.

The language of renewal, regeneration and renaissance speaks of the spiritual dimension in the reordering of our cities. It is a theological language which recognises the divine involvement in, and concern for, every aspect of human life.

Across the country everyday, people are profoundly involved in the healing and transformation of their neighbourhoods. It is their vision and faithfulness that gives us the courage to celebrate life and faith in our urban communities and commit ourselves to calling for justice for all.



Recommendations

Faithful Cities was commissioned by the Church of England, in consultation with other partners. Recommendations are addressed to the Church of England, other churches and faith groups; as well as to the government and agencies working in our urban areas. We hope that the recommendations will be taken up by many other groups and institutions working for the well-being of our towns and cities.

Faithful capital

- 1. The Church of England with its ecumenical partners must maintain a planned, continued and substantial presence across our urban areas.**

Implications

1. In relation to buildings, local leadership must be empowered to enable the creation of robust local structures, which can decide how to select and resource the best buildings for the purpose of worship and community needs.
2. We commend the use of the Community Value Toolkit as a resource for making decisions about the availability and deployment of human resources.
3. Government agencies should provide 'easy to access' grants to subsidize the heating costs of buildings used for community benefit, using sustainable energy resources.
4. The refunding of VAT should extend beyond listed buildings to include those in poor neighbourhoods who are receiving regeneration budgets.
5. Churches must take a lead on cherishing our public space and the natural environment of our urban areas.

- 2. Leaders in all situations need to have the opportunity of exposure to urban and contextual theology and practice.**

Implications

1. Opportunities for training and development in urban ministry, lay and ordained, should be fully integrated into the churches' formal training and accreditation and, wherever possible, be done ecumenically.
2. We commend the Church Related Community Worker initiative established by the United Reformed Church and ask that it be extended so that the training modules are available to other denominations and faith-related community workers.
3. Recruitment, training and continuing development of church leaders, clerical and lay, should give priority to their ability to empower others. In particular there is a priority to encourage engagement with others in public life.
4. Church and faith communities should together set up an Urban Policy Forum to monitor and address issues relating to urban life and faith.
5. We welcome the Government initiative to establish the Academy for Sustainable Communities and ask that the contribution of faith is included in its thinking.

Wealth and poverty

- 3. For the flourishing of a just and equitable society the gap between those living in poverty and the very wealthy must be reduced.**

Implications

1. The Government is asked to consider the effects of implementing a living wage rather than a minimum wage.
2. The Government should expand the criteria it uses for measuring economic success by including the Measure of Domestic Progress developed by the New Economics Foundation.
3. We commend initiatives being taken to involve people who experience poverty in the solution to problems in their community. We commend pilot schemes such as 'Participatory Budgeting' and the Sustainable Livelihoods programmes.
4. While government must do more to tackle the inequalities, the churches also have a duty to challenge the thoughtless accumulation of wealth which ignores the needs of the poor, both globally and locally. Churches must not hold back from confronting selfish lifestyles either in their own membership or in the wider population.

Equity in diversity

- 4. Social cohesion depends on the ability of people to live in harmony. Faith groups in particular must combat racism, fascism and religious intolerance at all levels of society.**

Implications

1. Churches and faith groups must express gracious hospitality through bonding, bridging and linking.
 2. An essential aspect of engagement in contemporary society is the development of networks between faith communities and secular communities. Examples of good practice should be identified and disseminated for wider learning.
 3. The development of organizations such as the Interfaith Network, the Council for Christians and Jews, the Christian/Muslim Forum should be supported financially and their insights used by both faith groups and Government departments.
 4. We commend Community Organizing and Community Development practice as ways of addressing local needs and issues of justice and in encouraging shared actions.
- 5. The Government must lead rather than follow public opinion on immigration, refugee and asylum policy. Specifically, asylum seekers should be allowed to sustain themselves and contribute to society through paid work. It is unacceptable to use destitution as a tool of coercion when dealing with 'refused' asylum seekers.**

Partnership

- 6. There needs to be greater clarity over expectations in partnership relationships between faith communities and public authorities at national, regional and local level.**

Implications

1. A major review of partnership relationships involving faith communities should be undertaken by Government agencies and faith communities as a means to ensure better and more consistent practice.

2. Churches and faith communities should ensure that there are regional arrangements to publicize, service and monitor partnership schemes in their areas and seek government support.
3. Partnership agreements should include long term implications of short term funding arrangements and the coverage of core operational costs. Government at all levels needs to take into account the distress and disruption caused to small voluntary and community organizations continually having to secure funding.

Young people

7. Government and faith communities must give new consideration to the informal education of young people.

Implications

1. The statutory nature of the Youth Service must be reinstated and properly funded by local authorities.
2. Key worker status must be given to youth work practitioners so they are recruited and retained in urban areas.
3. The spiritual well-being of young people must be an essential part of the Youth Matters strategy and implementation.
4. Young people's Councils of Faith should be developed and resourced to build respect and encourage participation in civic society.

8. We recommend a review of the role and impact of faith schools on social and community cohesion in urban settings.

Church Urban Fund

9. The Church of England should continue to support the Church Urban Fund as a vital resource for the churches' engagement in urban life.

10. Other denominations that have funds to support community engagement are asked to consider seriously whether they should work in partnership with the Church Urban Fund rather than maintaining separate structures.

What makes a good city?

11. Church leaders are asked to initiate wide ranging national debates about what makes a good city in light of this report.

Faithful Cities: A call for celebration, vision and justice (1-85852-315-X, £9.99) is published jointly by Methodist Publishing House and Church House Publishing. The report is available from booksellers or can be ordered online at www.mph.org.uk

This document and other resources are available from the *Faithful Cities* website: www.culf.org.uk