

Evangelicals and the New Towns

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'By 1990—according to present plans—nearly three million people will be living in New Towns in England and Wales. Typical newcomers to New Towns are young marrieds, cut off from their families and friends, open to new approaches—and yet home-centred and drawn largely from sections of the community long alienated from the churches.' So runs the publishers' blurb on this report.*

It was concern in respect of the problems created by centralised planning of New Towns and for the establishment of evangelical witness therein, expressed at the National Assembly of Evangelicals in October 1968, that led to the formation of this study group. It could be argued that Evangelicals as a body were twenty-five years late in facing the situation. New Towns were being planned from the War onwards, and over half a million people and their dependants have migrated to them. By nature of their general conservative approach, Evangelicals as a whole are slow to respond to changes in society. But many New Towns still face considerable expansion and others, notably the biggest of all planned for Central Lancashire, are yet at the drawing-board stage. So, 'better late than never' may be the verdict, if an Evangelical strategy can now emerge. The report, however, apparently needs to argue the case for long-term planning with a section of the Evangelical constituency who see it as inconsistent with a genuinely spiritual attitude—a reminder here of how diverse is the approach to spirituality among Evangelicals.

Mention of an Evangelical strategy poses the fundamental problem for Anglican Evangelicals, but more of that later. Considerable factual and practical help is now available in the report for those involved in New Towns, or new housing areas in old towns or cities. Some of the findings are already common knowledge. 'The newcomers

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to a town will have weakened some of their ties of friendship and family. They will be in strange surroundings which often lack the level of social, cultural and commercial facilities to which they have been accustomed. The process of readjustment to their new environment may be painful and prolonged' (p. 15). But it is very useful to have a mass of information and observations within the compass of a not-too-lengthy report.

Background material for church planning includes a sociological survey of New Town populations, description of the administration and development of New Towns and the policy of Development Corporations. For Anglican Evangelicals in a progressive and alert diocese much of this knowledge may be gained from diocesan officials and committees. Nevertheless, it is most useful to have it briefly presented as here, and for Evangelicals in the smaller denominations and Independents this background knowledge is essential.

The sociological section has a refreshing approach in seeing the population of New Towns not simply as so many souls to be saved, but as persons coping, not always very well, with new situations, subject to 'New Town blues', lacking a sense of community. Changes in thinking of the way leadership can most naturally arise are described. David Sheppard's warnings about stereotyped middle-class ideas of leadership are seen as relevant. And there is reminder that migration can sever all but the most firmly committed kind of church membership.

Two further questions dealt with in the report are—How may churches best approach the establishment of their work in New Towns? and, How are the churches already established getting on? Anglican Evangelicals will find the first question less relevant to their needs. Extension in New Towns is a matter of diocesan, not individual clergy or church, planning, and finance is less of a problem. Their concern is for a fair share of interest and opportunity within the diocesan set-up. But surely they will not normally be given such a share just because they are Evangelical. Individual clergy must have proved themselves to be of the calibre and gifts needed for these areas and able to co-operate in the diocesan, or ecumenical, strategy. The report presents some useful findings from churches in New Towns—nine of the forty seven being Anglican. Areas of need and factors in growth are assessed. Experience seems very similar to that of churches in older areas at many points, and tends to confirm impressions of church life throughout the country—not all of them gloomy by any means! 'Thirty-one of the churches recorded an upward trend in attendances and six were holding their own' (p. 60). What sort of minister is needed for the pioneer work in New Towns? The churches returning the study group's questionnaire present a picture of a well-nigh perfect pastor, preacher and leader—the kind of description some PCC's submit to the Patron when they really get the bit between their teeth! One wonders if Evangelicals in these areas are

still too wedded to the idea of the single omni-competent minister. Admittedly, lay leadership may be most difficult to discover and train. But if so, ought not the ministry in new areas to be on a team-work basis? This raises the difficult question of ecumenical co-operation, especially as civic authorities clearly favour it, whatever the theological justification.

The report sees part of the answer to the need of lay leadership in the deliberate migration of Christian families into New Towns. This obviously demands of Christian laity considerable sacrifice, but surely no more than that expected of many ministers in this country and practically all missionaries overseas. 'Few Christians are moving into New Towns, and this makes the situation worse, for often they can be isolated, and overwhelmed by the greatness of the work to be done' (p. 109). The point is important enough to warrant a further quotation. 'Christians in Britain should be made aware of the gaps in Christian witness in various New Towns. It may be that Christians need to think more about the traditional middle class status flight from job to job, home to home, town to town, and church to church, in search of promotion. A sacrificial and very real contribution to the extension of the kingdom might be made by Christians who deliberately stay for some time in a New Town with the specific object of serving the Lord by providing the continuity of witness which is so lacking' (p. 25). The only criticisms one would make are that it could have been more strongly expressed, and not restricted to New Towns. The congregational life and leadership of very many churches, outside middle class suburban areas, would be much stronger if considerations of improved status and promotion did not lead to such frequent moves.

When the value of this careful and thorough report is acknowledged, however, there remains for the Anglican Evangelical a fundamental question. Which has the prior claim, his loyalty to the Church of England or loyalty to interdenominational evangelicalism? The assumption of this report, as probably of the Evangelical Alliance which promoted it and certainly of most Evangelicals outside the Church of England, is that he is first an Evangelical and then an Anglican. It is an assumption which needs questioning, and is questioned by some. We are here brought right up against the doctrine of the Church, a doctrine much neglected and inadequately worked out by Evangelicals, at any rate in this century. One of the conclusions of the study suggests 'In view of the current interest in ecumenical experiments, Evangelicals need to give further thought to the possibility of joint interdenominational activity in New Towns by *Evangelical groups as an expression of 'Evangelical Ecumenicity'*. Exciting possibilities of radical experiments in building a 'living church' on a Biblical basis are being offered in the New Towns' (italics mine). And the 'summary of recommendations' (pp. 114-116), numbering fifteen in all, mostly assumes an isolationism of an Evangelical church in its work or co-

operation only with other Evangelical bodies. Indeed 'the possibility of Evangelicals setting up some kind of federated Evangelical centre, as their contribution to interdenominational experimenting' is specifically urged (p. 115). What of Evangelicals content to work within the larger and comprehensive churches? Recommendation 12 (p. 115) is that 'the main denominations should be asked to recognise their Evangelical wing as a distinct and substantial group deserving just as much consideration as is currently being given to those emphasising ecumenical concern.' Anglican dioceses are unlikely to pay much attention to a call from an interdenominational Evangelical group. Evangelicals must win their way into diocesan projects in New Towns by the quality of their ministry, their flexibility to new situations and obvious commitment to the welfare of the whole Church. Do bodies like the Evangelical Alliance, and non-Anglican Evangelicals generally, realise that most of those of like theology in the Church of England are wholeheartedly committed to their Church as that true part of the one Catholic Church to which they belong, until by union of divided churches a larger loyalty emerges? And do they realise that, even if in the past their membership of the Church of England was often defended on pragmatic grounds, increasingly a fuller doctrine of the church convinces them of the rightness of full involvement? Two quotations from the report would suggest a negative answer. 'For quite a substantial proportion of Evangelicals, it would seem that denominational loyalty is not an over-riding consideration' (p. 45). 'The concern not to be bound by denominational boundaries has long been a distinctive mark of Evangelical life and work' (p. 102). However true that may have been of Anglican Evangelicals hitherto, and true in certain ways of many, particularly laity, still, non-Anglicans need to realise the situation is not static. Growth and development of Anglican Evangelicalism are compelling a reappraisal of what it means to be of and in the church visible. And this entails a weakening of the influence of interdenominationalism in favour of church union. That this development makes life more complicated for Anglican Evangelicals, creates the risk of unwise compromise and gives rise to misunderstanding, they themselves are aware of as much as those who express concern from outside the Church of England. But until Evangelicals of all traditions can agree on, or agree to differ on, a doctrine of the church, much misunderstanding will prevail, and the Evangelical Alliance for all its usefulness in various ways will face considerable frustration.