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The Social and Political Implications of Lay Activism: a Case Study of Christian Social Action in Leeds*

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Introduction

This paper examines the social and political implications arising from the Christian laity's involvement in social action initiatives in an urban context in the United Kingdom. It draws on the findings of a micro-study undertaken in the city of Leeds.¹ A micro-study of this kind facilitates a detailed examination of the factors in people's everyday lives which motivate them to act in particular ways.² It also has the potential to elucidate the dynamics of a wider situation because local situations are affected by and affect the regional, national and international arenas.³ Analysis of this micro-study, therefore, has a broader application and can illuminate the role of the Christian laity, actual and potential, in other localities, in Eastern as well as Western Europe.

We argue that the laity is formulating and acting on its own theology which it constructs, or reconstructs, in urban environments. Central to this theology is the calling of the laity to engage in social action in the context of life in the city. The wider implication of this calling is that lay activists challenge the structure and authority within their own congregations, within broader Christian groupings and within the local system of power. This suggests that the interests and experiences of faith leaders must not be generalised as representative of all Christians, and that new systems of interaction must be established between the laity and the secular city.

Part I of this paper begins with a description of the context in which the micro-study was conducted. This comprises two parts: the methodology which informed the research, and a brief introduction to the city of Leeds. Part II of the paper describes the various Christian groups in the city and their involvement in social action. Part III concludes with an analysis of the effects of lay social activism in urban environments and draws particular attention to the ways in which laypeople simultaneously inform and shape the structures both of Christian authority and of civic traditions.

Part I: The Context

Methodology of the Micro-Study

This paper draws on the findings of a two-year research project.⁴ The project

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employed a webbed methodology which included the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. Primary data were gathered using three methods of data collection: a postal questionnaire survey of Christian leaders; a series of interviews with lay activists; and observations of participants at social action organisations and projects. The data collected by these different methods were cross-referenced to construct a picture of Christian social activism in Leeds and were analysed to draw out the social and political implications of this activism.

Interviewees and sites of participant observations were selected to represent the breadth of social action initiatives in the city. They therefore included people and projects involved in different types of activities such as social care, fundraising and campaigning work. They also included congregational social action initiatives, Christian social action organisations and the statutory sector.

The selection of research subjects for interviews and participant observation was also informed by the way in which Christianity was defined in this project. Christianity was recognised as a social phenomenon which brings together groups of people for worship, social action and social, cultural and political interaction. Moreover, it was recognised that ethnic and gender diversity have an impact on the dynamics of Christian groupings. For example, attention has been drawn to the different experiences and roles that women and men have within Christian groupings.⁵ To avoid homogenising Christian groupings in a way that assumes 'the commonality of experiences in a very unidimensional way and with an ahistorical fixidity',⁶ the selection of interviewees and sites for participant observation reflected the diverse social characteristics of members of Christian groups. Those involved in the research, therefore, included people of different Christian denominations, people with different ethnic backgrounds, women and men, and people living in different localities. It can be seen, therefore, that the research methodology added the diversity of locality to other factors.

The City of Leeds

The research methodology reflected the importance of social characteristics and context. Context is significant because social activists affect their context and are affected by it.⁷ The city of Leeds is an urban environment populated by people of different faith, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. It grew rapidly in size and prosperity in the nineteenth century due to industrial development (its population grew from 50,000 in 1801 to nearly 500,000 by the end of the century⁸). However, the decline in its textile and manufacturing industries in recent decades has led to the development of new economic strategies, and Leeds is now known for its financial, legal and retail sectors.

Despite these developments, the city faces multiple social and economic problems. In particular, some areas of the city and some sections of the city's population are affected by high levels of socio-economic deprivation. People who live in the inner city tend to have lower educational attainment levels and higher levels of unemployment. The long-term unemployment rate is as high as 45 per cent in some areas of the inner city.⁹ In addition, inner-city wards are affected by a concentration of poor-quality housing and inadequate access to facilities such as health resources. Moreover, particular sections of the city's population are disproportionately disadvantaged. For example, the unemployment rates of minority ethnic groups are between 8 and 16 per cent higher than that of 'white' people in Leeds.¹⁰

Shared concern about these inequalities and their effects on city life has led

various agencies in Leeds to initiate projects which seek to alleviate some of these problems and to improve the overall economic, cultural and social prospects of the city. These agencies operate in three main sectors which can be broadly defined as public, business and voluntary. The main institution of the public sector is the local government, Leeds City Council (LCC), which comprises elected representatives of the people and a vast number of employees. Together they are responsible for the civic provision of services such as education, health, housing, social welfare and transport. In contrast, the city's business sector is held together by common economic interests. It works to extend its influence through the provision of increased employment opportunities and financial investment so as to maximise its long-term profits. Finally, the voluntary sector comprises a broad spectrum of organisations and groups which provide a range of social care services, participate in regeneration schemes and engage in campaigns which seek to combat social injustices in the city. In this way, the public, business and voluntary sectors give structure to civic life and to social action initiatives undertaken in Leeds.

In recent years individual agencies from different sectors have developed strategic working relationships as a means to achieving common socio-economic objectives in the city. At present 200 organisations work in partnership on different projects. They have developed an overarching scheme to guide future regeneration initiatives. This scheme is called 'Vision for Leeds' and it exemplifies the increasingly important role that individual agencies and different sectors of the civic system play in shaping the city's future. Christians work within all these sectors and their social activism is the focus of this paper. Let us now look at the specific contribution which they make through their involvement in social action.

Part II: Christian Lay Social Activism in Leeds

Christians in Leeds

The laity's involvement in social action can be contextualised with reference to the demography of Christian groupings and the contribution which they make to the city. In Leeds, Christians belong to three main traditions: Protestant, Roman Catholic and Orthodox. The Protestant and Orthodox traditions contain sub-groupings. There are many denominations within the Protestant tradition, and some of these have ethnic or national links. For example, many African–Caribbean Christians in Leeds belong to the 'Black majority churches' which have been established to support Christians who are also members of minority ethnic groups.

Although Christian denominations and individual churches tend to organise themselves independently for worship and social action, a wider Christian network also operates in Leeds. In recent years there has been an emphasis on developing ecumenical relationships. This has led to initiatives in which congregations of different backgrounds worship and/or work together in the area of social action. The enthusiasm for such initiatives has resulted in the establishment of the Council of Leeds Churches Together (CoLeCT) which facilitates the development of future ecumenical ventures. By committing themselves to joint action on common initiatives, many Christians are attempting to further their influence within the city with the aim of achieving specific social action objectives. This reflects the fact that the laity of all denominations, ethnic groups and individual churches have a tradition of involvement in social action initiatives: the evidence shows that 94 per cent of the congregations in Leeds engage in social action.¹¹

Analysis of the activities of Christian laypeople shows that they participate in four main types of initiative. The first is social welfare provision; that is, working to alleviate the problems of the marginalised or vulnerable such as homeless people. The second type of initiative is fundraising for local, national or international causes. The third type comprises regeneration initiatives which aim to improve the quality of life in disadvantaged areas of the city. The fourth type comprises campaigning initiatives which aim to bring about social change at local, national and international levels. Some campaigning initiatives aim to build social relationships: for example, one organisation facilitates dialogue between people of different faiths in Leeds. Other campaigns aim to address social injustices in the international arena: for example, one group works for the cancellation of the debt owed by the world's poorest countries. Other campaigns aim to change the attitudes and policies of Christian groups or congregations: for example, the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement (LGCM) campaigns for their acceptance by the churches.

Lay Christians are not only involved in different types of social action initiatives, they also make strategic decisions about the issues and projects in which they become involved. For example, lay activists working through congregations most consistently choose to participate in social welfare initiatives. Roughly three quarters of the total number of congregations in Leeds concentrate their social action efforts in the fields of youth work and care for elderly people.¹² Just over half the congregations are engaged in social action to support families. Taken together, youth work, care for elderly people and support for families can be seen as reflecting a commitment to ensuring that adequate social care and welfare provision is made for people at different stages of their lives when they are perhaps at their most vulnerable. Just over half the congregations are involved in local neighbourhood projects such as regeneration schemes.¹³ This indicates that laypeople have a concern for and a commitment to their locality and are working with other local people on issues which affect them. A similar proportion are involved in international aid initiatives such as fundraising for overseas development work. This suggests that laypeople also have a concern for people they will never meet and situations outside their personal experience. Since participation in international aid and local neighbourhood projects is not mutually exclusive, the concerns of the laity evidently include both the local and the global. Meanwhile, approximately one third of the congregations involve themselves in campaigning work such as antiracism initiatives and campaigns for world peace. This indicates that they are concerned with making their ethical values heard in the local, national and international arenas.

This evidence shows that laypeople give priority to specific social action objectives. The question arises about how decisions about prioritising are reached. Proponents of 'grassroots theology' or 'popular theology' argue that activities of laypeople are a consequence of 'the relationships between a person's thought and the life-situation that gives rise to that thought'.¹⁴ This suggests that the laity may participate in social action initiatives as the result of a variety of motivations, including religious belief and the socio-political situation. Let us now examine these in more detail.

Motivations for Lay Social Activism

An examination of the aims and motivations of lay activists in Leeds shows that Christians do not separate their 'religion' from that in their lives which is 'not religious'.¹⁵ Rather, their social activism reflects a range of religious and social

concerns. They make reference to many different motivating factors including religious beliefs, personality and personal circumstances, ethnic and cultural background and the socio-political context of the city of Leeds.

Lay activists frequently draw attention to experiences from their past or their personal history when explaining the reasons for their involvement in social action. For example, some draw attention to their upbringing and the values instilled in them when they were younger, as in the words of one female activist: 'as a child growing up, I had a certain discipline and principles instilled in me. The respect I had for others was a reflection of my Catholic upbringing.' Another activist traced her involvement in social action to the fact that her family had been 'involved in city life'. The personal stories of some activists also guided them to become involved in particular types of social action. For example, an activist working for an ecumenical organisation stated that a crucial motivation for his work was his experience of denominational relationships in Merseyside during the 1950s and 1960s: 'There was a great division at this time and this total prejudice was echoed in my family life.'

In addition to speaking about early life experiences, many activists, and particularly women, spoke about events in their adult life which had precipitated their involvement in social action. These events were often personal crises such as bereavement, retirement or divorce. For example, one activist spoke of the death of her husband just after they had both retired, an event which forced her to reconsider her plans for the future. She chose to begin fundraising for other women who had experienced loss and bereavement. She said that when she saw the way that extra money and clothes helped to improve these people's quality of life she thought, 'something good has come out of what happened'. As well as referring to their personal history, some activists spoke of being motivated by the knowledge that they possessed qualities which were suited to social activism. Some spoke of knowing that they had the ability to support and encourage other people and said that this had led them to become involved in projects requiring them to use these skills. As one activist employed to encourage and support local groups in establishing projects to meet their social and economic needs put it, 'I have always known that I could do this work, I can get people to do things ... often when people have ideas, they just need encouragement and they can do it. I can get people to try and I see this as a gift.' Activists also spoke of the personal satisfaction that they gained from being involved in social action. For example, some believed they had made a difference to the quality of other people's lives by equipping them with the skills to cope with their problems. For these activists, a sense of achievement sustains them in their work and reinforces their commitment to the project.

Activists thus gave many personal reasons for involvement in social action and each story was specific to the individual who told it. However, themes emerged from the telling of these stories. People spoke of becoming involved in social action because of their family background, times of crisis, their personality or the encouragement of others. In addition, lay activists contextualised their personal story in socio-political and/or faith terms.

In terms of the socio-political context of Leeds as a motivating factor for involvement in social action, many lay activists said that they participated in social action projects in response to an existing need in the city. They had observed particular social problems or inequalities and felt compelled to work towards alleviating them. For example, some spoke of being motivated by gaps in service provision, such as a lack of social support for elderly people, or in response to contemporary issues, such as the increase in homelessness, or social injustice, such as racism. For some of these

activists the desire to act on a particular issue, or in a particular situation, was related to their Christian faith because the latter provided an ethical framework. However, their passion for the issue was informed by its specific socio-political content.

In addition to perceived need within the city as a whole, lay Christians who belonged to minority ethnic groups also spoke of motivations related to their minority status in Leeds. They described a sense of belonging with other people who shared the same ethnic and cultural background and a resultant commitment to sustaining community life in the present and for future generations. For example, lay members of the Chinese church hold services in Mandarin, Cantonese and English. This is seen as a means of bringing Christianity to Chinese groupings in the city and as a way of passing on cultural traditions and languages to the younger generation. They regard ensuring the survival of their ethnic and cultural group as crucial to their role as laypeople.

While discussing Christian beliefs as a motivating factor for involvement in social action, many lay activists spoke of the connection between their social action and their understanding of what it meant to be a Christian. They explained that Christianity should make a practical difference to people's lives. The coordinator of an evangelical campaign said that 'As a Christian, I see that the Bible teaches "You are the salt of the earth and the light of the world". We are supposed to make a difference, not just by preaching, but how we live.' Many lay activists also said that it had been their religious beliefs which had called them to work for social justice. As one man working for an ecumenical organisation put it, 'The Christian faith is ... expressed in "Love God and your neighbour". Love is a social activity not a religious ideal. Many people are dying through neglect, apathy, greed, and this is a denial of the Gospel imperative.'

For these activists, then, social interaction is inextricably linked to religious beliefs. Their beliefs inspire them to become involved in social action and sustain their long-term commitment. The role that faith plays in sustaining involvement was highlighted by many social activists who acknowledged God's help as a source of support and strength for their achievements. When speaking of her work one activist commented that 'I can do nothing but for the grace of God and his help. I don't see it as what I have done because of my brilliance. It is what God has allowed me to accomplish.'

Another aspect of the role of religion in motivating social action is personal experience of faith. Some activists spoke of a defining moment in their lives when they made a commitment to their faith or when they felt called to undertake social action. Women in particular spoke of a faith experience which led to their involvement. One activist, for example, recalled that 'I prayed for purpose and direction. Then I was out with friends one day for a walk and went to their house for dinner. The man who runs the camp [the centre of her social action] was there. It was divine intervention, I was given something to do.'

This woman and other activists identified prayer as a factor which had led to their participation in specific initiatives. Moreover, the role of personal spirituality is acknowledged by some Christian organisations in the city. For example, an ecumenical organisation, 'Faith in Leeds', provides opportunities to reflect on social justice in the city. It facilitates one-day events called 'Retreat on the Streets': people spend a day in the city with only 50 pence spending money so that they can gain an insight into the lives of those on the margins of society. Prayer and personal spiritual reflection enable individual members of Christian churches to consider the presence of God in an urban environment. By providing opportunities for these, 'Faith in

Leeds' aims to encourage a wider network of Christians to seek spiritual growth and involve themselves in social activism.

There are two main aspects, then, to the role of religion in motivating lay activism. Many people find themselves inspired or directed by specific religious beliefs or teachings. In addition, or alternatively, individuals may be motivated and sustained by their personal faith and spiritual life. The role of religion must, however, be considered alongside other personal and socio-political factors motivating an individual to participate in social action initiatives. Taken together, all these motivating factors relate to the way laypeople perceive their role within Christian groupings and in the context of the secular city.

Part III: The Social and Political Implications of Lay Activism

(Re)constructing the Role of Laity

The reasons which laypeople give to explain their participation in social action show that they accept responsibility for the welfare of their congregation, of people throughout the city and of people world-wide. Moreover, they believe it is their calling to work towards creating a more just and peaceful society. This implies that social activists view themselves as capable of producing real change.

The context for their action is their membership of Christian groupings within the city. They recognise that individuals, with their different strengths and weaknesses, are most effective when working together to achieve specific goals. This is seen to be an important strength in the face of the problems which confront people in their everyday lives in the city. For many Christians in the city of Leeds, therefore, social activism is about the power of communal action and mutual support. It is based on the premise that laypeople are powerful when they work together to achieve social action goals.

The social activism of laypeople also suggests that they have a clear vision of the future of the Church. For some this includes changes to its present form. Many argue that if the role of laypeople is to be developed, existing structures of authority should be modified in order to encourage the sharing of workloads between clergy, congregations and local people. Some activists go further than this, calling for change in the ways individual denominations and congregations view the role of the laity. They are demanding greater recognition for the work they do and are arguing that the potential exists for lay members to take on more work and authority. This call for change may be related to a single issue or it may be a general challenge to the structures of authority within individual churches.

The life experiences of many lay activists can lead them to be critical of traditional positions on specific issues. For example, family breakdown can result in a call for acknowledgment of the integrity of different models of family life. As a result, many lay activists are calling for discussions about what is meant by the family or legitimate sexual relationships within a Christian context and rejecting authoritative pronouncements. In making these demands, they are seeking to reconstruct Christian views and perspectives on issue-based concerns. This was recognised by a gay activist who stated that 'we want to have relationships outside the traditional married framework The Anglicans have said celibacy or heterosexuality. We are their Achilles Heel.' Lay activists are thus demanding recognition of the varied life experiences of members of Christian churches and of people in wider society, some of which are inconsistent with traditional church policies and the attitudes held by

traditional church authorities. They are arguing that their experiences require those in authority to enter into dialogue with laypeople, and that such a dialogue may result in amendments to these policies. In this way, they are engaging with traditional authorities from an issue-based, radical perspective.

A smaller proportion of social activists in Leeds are arguing for change on the basis of opposition to the present system of authority. They state that decision-making power should not reside with religious leaders, but that the authority of the laity should be increased. For example, one activist gave up a teaching job to work full-time in the diocese in pursuit of his commitment to increasing the role of the laity in the Catholic Church. Today, he continues to express his disappointment that the Church has 'moved slowly on this front' and argues that progress on extending the authority of the laity must occur soon if the Church is to be considered relevant to the majority. This approach is more radical than those described above inasmuch as it may be perceived as an attempt to reduce the importance of the vocation of the ministry or priesthood, rather than as a simple request that Christian responsibilities be shared or social issues debated.

These examples of the different understandings that laypeople have of their role also have implications for future patterns of social action and the role of the Christian presence in the city. Many activists carry out their work within established patterns of social action and are happy to work within existing structures. In this context, they are setting up new projects, facilitating the development of others and ensuring that initiatives are relevant to people's needs. In contrast, a smaller number of activists are committed to a more radical or controversial agenda and through their social action activities they oppose aspects of Christian or denominational practice and policy. Their concern is not with progress in terms of development, but with progress through changing existing Christian practices. For example, the LGCM calls on churches to recognise and respect the contribution of lesbian and gay members. They state that despite being marginalised they are choosing to campaign for change because 'we are all part of God's plan and have a part to play'. On this basis they are consciously campaigning to redefine and extend Christianity beyond a heterosexual paradigm. Others again are seeking a path between radical reform and maintaining the status quo. They are attempting to bring about changes in patterns of social action to ensure progression towards new models of the Christian presence in the city. This endeavour requires more Christians to make a commitment to social activism and to link this commitment to their own spiritual quest. These lay activists believe that social action is a crucial strategy which will encourage local congregations to move their focus from internal concerns to concerns within wider society. They are committed to encouraging other lay members to reflect on what it means to be a Christian in the city. One activist identified 'a distinction between those who believe that God is to be found only within the Church and those who believe that God is also at work in the world'.

This approach has led some lay activists to work with non-Christian or secular organisations. Many of them see this as a pragmatic measure in situations where they themselves are lacking in the necessary resources, skills, knowledge or qualifications to establish an initiative. Such cooperation with secular organisations is also viewed as an opportunity to draw on the support of others who have similar experiences and common goals. For example, the LGCM draws on the support and information of secular gay and lesbian groups, while other Christians draw on the skills of women's or cultural organisations. By utilising existing networks of expertise, these lay activists are demonstrating that Christians can benefit from wider society and

especially those social and political networks with which they have common purposes. In this way, they acknowledge that there are benefits to be derived from interaction between Christians and secular society.

In contrast, other lay activists choose to work within secular organisations with the aim of influencing the development of civic traditions in the city of Leeds. Their activity has implications for understandings of the Christian presence in city life. Let us look at this subject in more detail.

Lay Activists Shaping Civic Traditions

A full understanding of the role of Christian laypeople in the city requires an explanation of their relationship with and position within the secular civic traditions. Most Christians believe that the Christian message has a positive contribution to make to those outside the Church. The calling of Christian laypeople to improve the quality of people's lives and city life in general has real practical consequences. What is more, they believe that such practical demonstrations of the Christian message have the potential to reshape civic structures and to make an impact on the city's social and political functions. Their understandings of Christianity are therefore often rooted in the assumption that their involvement in activism is also about bringing about social change to empower others.

The ability of Christian lay activists to shape future civic traditions depends upon the developing relationship between the laity and civic power. This relationship is often based on joint provision of vital services in the city. A Christian coordinator of a project which provides support for elderly people described the contribution of her church as providing volunteers and premises and that of a secular organisation as providing management expertise. Moreover, the efforts of Christian groups have led to an active response to their initiatives on the part of the city structures, which are now offering expertise, guidance and training to Christian lay activists in an effort to ensure their sustained involvement and a high quality of service provision. For example, LCC employs Voluntary Action Coordinators who work with local congregations (as well as with other, non-Christian groups) to facilitate their activity in providing social care services in the local community. The recognition that city structures value the contribution of Christians in Leeds has led some Christian organisations to engage themselves actively with the policies which are adopted in the city and, where appropriate, to try to influence them. For example, one organisation sees itself as providing

an interface between the church and the city – both structures and individuals – and to raise relevant issues and to make sure that information flows both ways, that is between church and city: the Gospel insight into the city and knowledge about the city and its vision for Leeds for the church.

In this way, it believes, that there can be a synergistic relationship between the church and the city, and that both can benefit from their interaction.

There is also a wariness, however, amongst some lay activists that Christians might come to be viewed by statutory organisations as 'just another voluntary group'. These activists view Christianity as essentially oppositional in that it provides the moral and organisational foundation from which to challenge secular values and policies which perpetuate social injustice: Christian beliefs are thus the resource for identifying and combating social injustices. This means that Christians are often at

the forefront of initiatives which oppose social injustices within the city, even if this involves confronting the secular authority of the local system of power. For this reason, some lay activists argue that it is important to avoid building up too many links with LCC. They fear that to do so might lead to a dilution of their aims and damage their integrity as Christians with a vision of the future rooted in a commitment to their faith. While voicing their appreciation of the help offered by the city, some activists therefore speak about the need for Christian groupings to work from their own agenda which clearly stems from ethical and spiritual beliefs. 'I believe', said one, 'that we [lay social activists] can be too dependent, on politicians, church leaders, social workers. We can do things for ourselves.' For these activists, maintaining ownership of the social action projects in which they are involved is also about ensuring that Christian integrity remains intact.

This spectrum of views about the benefits and limitations of working with secular organisations and the local system of power has implications for the future role of the Christian laity in other contexts. A discussion of these issues brings this paper to a conclusion.

Conclusion

Members of the Christian laity in Leeds are involved in a range of social action initiatives. They are engaging with issues of concern to their individual congregations, their local areas and wider social networks in the city. This social activism represents an expression of the commitment of laypeople to their religious beliefs and of their responses to their own personal histories and to the socio-political situation in Leeds. These activities also have practical consequences; and these practical consequences, in turn, have broader repercussions on church life and city life.

The findings of this micro-study have an application beyond Leeds pertaining particularly to the political and social implications of lay activism. They suggest that lay involvement in social activism extends the role of laypeople beyond sharing in worship and receiving guidance from faith leaders: their role comes to include political, economic and social responsibilities for non-Christians and for the cities in which they live. Moreover, as part of their involvement in social activism, laypeople create their own platforms within the church and in urban environments. Social action therefore functions as a space in which laypeople can articulate and act upon their own understandings of Christian mission and theology. The issues in which they involve themselves may have much in common with those in which their leadership is involved. Where there is a discrepancy, some lay activists use this space to question those in authority and some question the system of authority itself. For these activists, social action is a political and strategic choice; they consciously undertake it as a means through which to effect social change. For other social activists, meanwhile, their primary objective is not to redefine authority in their faith group, but to achieve specific social action objectives. However, their involvement has political implications because in the process they shape the structures and agendas of their own Christian grouping.

Lay activists also shape the future of city life. In the short term, they have an impact on the lives of local people in a practical way, providing social care and participating in activities such as campaigns for social justice. Such grassroots action brings about social change in the long term because it is an enactment of Christian values and visions before non-Christians, including those who have power within

civic structures. When the latter engage with the Christian laypeople, they must therefore also engage with their alternative vision of society. In this way, representations of Christianity in urban environments are not dependent on the interface between faith leaders and civic leaders. As a result, the social activism of the laity contributes to the process of democratisation within urban environments as the civic system responds to them as citizens exercising their rights and responsibilities. Lay Christian activism is thus playing an important role in the UK, and it is a role which can be seen as having a broader application as a model for social change and the future development of civil society in both East and West.

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