

'INTO ALL THE WORLD' – IN A SCOTTISH HOUSING SCHEME

GORDON R. PALMER, RUCHAZIE CHURCH, GLASGOW

When I was first becoming interested in the mission of the church to the poorer urban parts of our cities, I found it difficult to find others I knew who shared an interest in the church's apparent lack of impact in inner-city areas. I also found it difficult to discover much in the way of constructive debate and helpful literature on the subject. It was not that the subject matter was entirely new (Thomas Chalmers and Patrick Brewster, for two, were important earlier figures), but it certainly was not in fashion. However, since then greater attention has been given to the church and its mission in the sprawling cities.

We have seen the emergence of journals such as *Third Way* and *City Cries* and groups such as the Evangelical Urban Training Project, Careforce, Oasis, the impact of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission Report *Faith In The City*, a number of important books (e.g. *The Urban Christian* by Ray Bakke, *Into the City*, by John Vincent), the influence of social issues on the evangelical agenda that was substantially highlighted at and following the Lausanne Congress in 1974, and the involvement of relief agencies such as TEAR Fund, which is now recognizing that the poor are not all overseas. In a number of ways, then, there has been an increasing interest in and attention to the church in the poor urban areas of the world as a whole, and in our own land too.

Since such material is now more readily available, this article is not offering an analysis of the city, nor a theology of urban mission, nor a discussion on 'who are the poor?' Nor is it a story of hope and revival amid the slums, but simply a reflection upon a few years of engagement in urban mission through the life and witness of a small parish church in the east end of Glasgow. The main contention is that although a better selection of literature is now available, more aid and help is being offered, and

more groups and organisations are involving themselves in poor city areas, we are still only scratching the surface. There are many issues and questions that we are only learning to ask, far less answer; there are still too few resources at the disposal of those working in urban priority areas; there is still enormous indifference and misunderstanding in the church at large. Most of all, while we hear a lot of sympathy and sometimes admiration expressed, the majority of the church still wishes to keep its distance.

Our community, Ruchazie, is a small part of Greater Easterhouse. It was built in the 1950s, is entirely local authority housing (at the moment), has poor facilities, high unemployment, crime, truancy, one-parent families, incidence of illness, housing turnover, *etc.* There are a large number of empty houses, some of which the council find impossible to let, and a large number of local people have their name on a list to be re-housed elsewhere. It is a fragmented community, with no focal point, no local industry, no great sense of belonging. In this context we seek to serve God and further the mission of the church. As we do so, we find a number of difficult questions coming back at us, and challenging us to relearn, to rethink our position and approach.

What is the Gospel?

One of the important changes that has affected Evangelicalism in recent times is the recognition that the gospel is understood and presented with a good deal of cultural baggage. 'The writing and reading of the Bible, the presentation of the gospel, conversion, church and conduct – all these are influenced by culture. It is essential therefore, that all churches contextualise the gospel in order to share it effectively in their own culture' (*Willowbank Report*, Lausanne Occasional Paper No.2, p.33). This raises a challenge to those working in poor urban areas, as we quickly find that our background is so different that there are a lot of cross-cultural steps to

take. Furthermore, the church culture in Scotland as a whole is alien to the urban poor and so it is not appropriate simply to transplant models and practices that have worked elsewhere and expect them to take proper root in parishes such as Ruchazie. But in addition to the cross-cultural challenge there is a more fundamental question: what is 'good news to the poor' (Luke 4:18)?

As well as having many cultural aspects that we have mistakenly confused with what is vital to the being of the church, we have explored the question 'what is the gospel?' from the vantage point of those who have, rather than the have-nots. We have not sought to see the other perspective, to listen to the issues and questions of the poor, despite the fact that the vantage point of Christianity is the stable at Bethlehem and the cross at Golgotha. How many evangelistic events have well-known, prominent persons on the platform and testimonies from the famous? In doing so we play the worldly status game.

Many are poor because of the disadvantages that have surrounded them from birth. In order to be good news for them, the gospel must address their being sinned against as well as their being sinners; it must say something to them as victims. While my middle-class training often addressed questions about *e.g.* whether or not God existed, it never asked 'Whose side is he on?' There was more in my background about how we can maintain belief in a world that has come of age, than how we maintain belief in a world that is inhumane. Some of what we have sought to do in Ruchazie could, I suppose, be seen as reflecting a social emphasis and give rise to the question of the relationship between evangelism and social action. What we have sought to do with things such as the Credit Union (a financial co-operative, owned and run by local people) which tries to help people have greater control of their finances and reduce the temptation to go to money-lenders or the finance companies (who are just as oppressive in their own way), is not a service additional to our preaching – social action on top of evangelism – but a

direct attempt to speak to people in their 'sinned-againstness'. It is more integral to the gospel than an added social element, or a bridge between church and community, because the gospel says something to us as people who have been sinned against and not just as sinners.

While the usual gospel presentation that I had heard was about law (our being sinners) and grace, in a community where guilt and despair were already so powerfully present as to have squashed any notion of self-worth out of people, perhaps themes like breakdown and reconciliation, or despair and purpose would be more like good news.

What about Worship?

It is certainly clear that preaching was an integral part of worship in the New Testament period, and in the early church, and it is something which I am still keen to maintain and devote time and energy to. Nevertheless, the style and form of preaching to which I was accustomed were cerebral, and also left a lot of responsibility to the congregation to make their own application of the principles being expounded. For those who have no background of thinking in a conceptual manner this will not do. People in our parish think more in concrete, specific terms, more in pictures than in principles. To expect them to take and apply general principles from a sermon when in no other situation in their lives do they ever think in such a pattern, is not good preaching. Preaching must be more visual, pictorial, concrete. It was our recognition of this and of the different ways in which people learn that led to our starting a 'worship workshop' midweek. At this we outline the theme of the coming Sunday's service and its Bible base, and in different groups follow this theme by writing prayers, doing a sketch, a discussion, finding appropriate songs, building some illustration, drawings, *etc.* In one group, of children, we did a sketch of the woman caught in adultery and in the following week when

a school teacher was mentioning the story in class, those who had been in our group were able to correct her and in fact acted it out again for the whole class! But not just children, adults too remember more when it is something they have been involved in, and been given help to make the connections between the passage and their own life and context.

More fundamentally, the whole format of worship as it is widely practised within the Church of Scotland is very different to anything and everything else that people in urban priority areas experience in their lives. There is no other time or occasion when they go into a room that is anything like our churches in size and shape (when I made the point once to another minister he said to me ‘what about the library?’!), and since the local houses are small and families big, people are used to noise, movement and bustle. Due to constraints of finance we have not been able significantly to adjust the building. (Once it is built you are stuck with it – unless you are as privileged as our neighbouring church across the M8: their sanctuary became unfit for use and grants became available to augment local effort and a far better sanctuary was made from an upstairs hall.) Nevertheless, items like banners, visual displays and models can provide colour, images and illustrations as well as make the place less empty and cold. This is also a way of saying to people that their talents in making these things are valuable and can be offered to the congregation and to God as part of our celebration. And in a place like Ruchazie this is very important as people have been made to feel in a whole range of ways that they do not count, that they have nothing of substance to offer.

Music played before the service, and songs of worship sung during the distribution of the bread and wine are also ways in which the large emptiness of silent big buildings is made more accessible to people. Silence is something that we have regarded as integral to religious life: even the notion of a personal ‘quiet time’ emphasizes this. For

many of us silence is a welcome, profitable and sometimes all too rare feature of life. But in Ruchazie, for so many people there is constant noise and activity in the house, with people coming and going all the time, and to go to church and have a spirituality practised that starts with silence as a prerequisite is both forbidding and unrealistic.

Music is an important aspect of worship and we find ourselves more and more looking around for suitable items of praise. As time passes I am increasingly frustrated with the unsuitability of the *Church Hymnary*. Its vocabulary is archaic, often obscure, and esoteric. There remain within Scottish Evangelicalism many who are suspicious of choruses (the words are, I am told, flippant and shallow – even though so many of them are the words of Scripture put to music) and of the use of instruments other than an organ. Yet the organ is not the most suitable musical instrument for every musical style, and its predominance has wedded us to a style that satisfies the musically highbrow but does nothing (and rightly so!) for many in communities such as ours. The organ is also less effective than a piano in teaching a congregation new tunes. Furthermore, by concentrating on one instrument only to lead praise, we are departing from biblical example (e.g. Psalm 150) and ignoring those who have other musical gifts.

Far too often Christian praise has depended on rural images and if that is what predominates in our worship, it only serves to reinforce the notion that Christianity has little to do with everyday life, or is suited for those surrounded by beauty, peace and leisure. Modern hymns may be more suitable, but are still generally at a highbrow pitch in terms of style and vocabulary (good content and extensive vocabulary are not the same thing).

There is a lot to be said for people in a congregation writing their own. We now have a number of songs to well-known tunes, written locally, which use familiar words and images to express the gospel. When one sees this done it is surprising how many profound gospel truths

can be expressed in ordinary, everyday language. Our assumption that the big words – the good solid religious words – are necessary is not a sign of maturity, but of laziness, in not taking the trouble to express the meaning and significance of the gospel in a different style.

Questions of Lifestyle

The first challenge and problem for us here is to ask honestly if our ideas of right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable behaviour are based on solid Christian ground or on middle-class norms. Now drunkenness is not something to be commended, but we readily express horror at what we consider bad drinking habits (especially among the poor, despite Proverbs 31:4-7) and yet say a lot less about, for example, over-eating, a subject on which the Bible is not silent. We are more shocked by a four-letter swear word than by hearing someone in polite tones run down someone else – yet there is more biblical teaching condemning the latter. Gambling on horse-racing, for instance, is deplorable, but stock-exchange speculation is not. For years we have complained about people who drop litter, but been unconcerned about the use of CFCs.

The image and impression that we have put across, albeit unconsciously at times, is that the kind of living required is one beyond the reach of many in poor urban areas. Some, for example, do not get married not because they are in favour of trial marriage or serial monogamy but because they have got the impression that to have a 'proper wedding' you need to be able to afford the white dress, hymn sheets, big cars *etc.* There is of course the registry office, but we have some people in the parish who, because they believed in God, wanted more than a quick office ceremony but, because they could not afford the full-blown circus that plagues the run up to every wedding, if not the wedding day itself, thought that they could not have a church wedding.

Patterns of dress are another way in which we have created a particular impression of who the church is and is

not for, not only in terms of how 'smartly' some dress (and moan at others not doing the same) but also how boring and grey is so much church dress. In a community where so much is so dull and weary and grey, there is a good opportunity for the church in a variety of ways, including decor and dress, to say that we are not going to give in, we are wishing to be bright, to celebrate, to counter dullness and depression.

It is not enough to deplore and condemn aspects of life in poor urban areas without trying to fight back at causes. For instance, noticing the loan sharks at work and being approached by people looking for money have brought home to us the problems that people have in managing their finance. One way we have sought to help is by establishing the Credit Union. Our nearest bank is miles away, and no one is going to go there to put in £1 or to empty the week's collection of small change: but some now do come along on Monday nights to the Credit Union to do just that. Low-cost loans are available, but perhaps more important is the opportunity to learn to save and budget, so that these loans are paid back at the agreed rate. Similarly, the problems of diet and poor shopping facilities caused one church member to get some people around him and work towards forming a food cooperative, which now provides fresh fruit and vegetables at lower prices than local shops.

Of course, there is much in the lifestyle of communities like ours that is at odds with all that Christianity stands for. It is chauvinistic, violent, unhygienic, lazy..., although it is a travesty to suggest that everybody is like that, or that these are the only features. I have witnessed incredible generosity and great determination against terrible odds: it is a wonder how so many survive so well. One of the reasons for the entrenched opposition to Christian values is the low number of Christians who stay in places like Ruchazie.

If society deteriorates and standards decline, till it becomes like a dark night or stinking fish, there is no

sense in blaming society, for that is what happens when fallen men and women are left to themselves, and human selfishness is left unchecked. The question to ask is 'Where is the church? Why are the salt and light of Jesus Christ not permeating and changing society?' (John Stott; *Issues Facing Christians Today*, Marshalls, Basingstoke, 1984, p.66).

Surely the lack of Christian presence has led to matters getting worse. It is dishonest of us to bemoan the lifestyle in areas like Ruchazie, to say it is too tough for us and merely to blame the residents or society or government. The salt goes elsewhere, the light moves on (and up in social terms!), and so it is to be expected that standards will collapse.

Where is the Church?

The question is not 'Will the church ever lose the poor urban areas?' but 'Will the church ever enter them?' Despite the rise in journals and para-church groups, despite the attention the large denominations have given recently, the church as a whole still keeps its distance. We have friends and relatives who have declined to come and visit in case their cars get damaged. This is very hurtful, especially when some add insult to injury by saying that they will pray for us. Many ask when we are leaving, because the implicit assumption is that this is not the sort of place you remain in for very long. Put simply, the church still wants to keep its distance. Of course reasons are given – 'I'm not the right kind of person' or 'There is the family to think of' – but these are often excuses.

Who is the 'right kind of person'? Each year for three years now we have had a youth volunteer worker with us, supplied through Careforce. Each has come from a very different background and straight out of university, is English and had no previous experience of areas like ours; yet each of them has been very well received and built good relationships with people here. One of them in fact is

still here, more than two years after his period as a voluntary worker is over! On the face of it, none of the three was 'the right kind of person', except that each of them was honest, listened, cared, tried to understand. That is the right kind of person.

It has generally puzzled me why the family issue is so quickly mentioned when it comes to inner-city mission, as compared to overseas mission. Overseas, education is often difficult or disrupted, there are dangers not usually encountered at home and violence is often commonplace. Why is it safe to take the kids there, but not to 'darkest Glasgow'? One of the great lacks in our parish is good examples of married life and parenthood. Generally, these are disaster areas and one of the key reasons for this is that there are no good role models. Young people have asked us 'Why should we get married when every marriage we know doesn't work?' – which is a very good question. What are we to say? 'There are plenty of good working examples in the west side of town'? How much better it would be to be able to name examples among those who are their neighbours. Good examples too of parenting is a desperate need. Much of the trouble with young people is due to the poor upbringing which is in part caused by lack of good examples of raising a family. Often parents do not interact with their children, do not play with them, do not ostensibly enjoy them, not because they have decided not to do any of that but because it has never occurred to them to do so, and this is partly because they have never seen anyone else do it! They are unaware of the value and benefits of doing so, and the children themselves will grow up, become parents and remain oblivious to all this. And no amount of work by social services, children's panels, schools and so on, will ever cover up for the lack of basic parental skills.

What about Leadership?

Leadership in the community is usually given by those who come in to work here from 9am till 5pm, Monday to

Friday, and who take their talents with them when they go home at night. This means that left behind are a number of 'helpers' but few who have had any experience of exercising power and control. A lack of expertise and confidence creates a paralysis of dependency. This affects all aspects of a community's life, the church included.

Those who are here all the time are, by and large, those who found school a bad experience and who did not really do well in terms of what is expected and demanded in traditional education. And yet it is traditional educational methods (lots of books, reading, conceptual thinking, *etc.*) that are used in church circles for teaching and training. We find it impossible to go to local bookshops and find suitable material for children's work, youth work, housegroups, *etc.* We have to work at producing our own nearly all the time which is very time-consuming. There is constant frustration at how hard people find it to grasp things and draw conclusions. So often we find ourselves going over the same ground again and again.

We might ask 'Where is the church?' in terms of how her abilities and talents are distributed. In areas like ours there are few with experience of chairing meetings, writing minutes (or having to write anything that someone else will look at!), working out plans, assessing priorities. In fact in communities like Ruchazie power and decision-making have been so systematically removed or undermined that in places where their re-introduction is attempted (such as the church), while it excites some, as often as not it threatens and scares others. This leaves us with difficulty in getting some jobs done, and with the particular tragedy that the only people able for things like looking after the buildings or minute-taking or whatever are the very ones that we need to see released from those jobs in order to be good elders, good visitors, good group leaders – which they would be were they allowed to get on with these things without having to do all the other jobs as well. Elsewhere in the city there are congregations with a number of people who can do the jobs required to

make things run smoothly and who are not needed to do so where they are, while we and others run at below the minimum.

Of course we do seek to work at building up people's confidence and gifts, and do make progress. However, often that progress comes to an end if the person or family moves out of Ruchazie, which is not unlikely. Not only do we lose them – and in a place like ours it is frustrating that the flow of talent is predominantly outwards – but we often find that as they move to a 'better area' to a church with more people and more able folks at work, the lack of confidence comes back, and they often do not make the transition into another church at all well. And so we end up with the frustrating situation that our badly missed key leadership personnel and other persons who were coming on, now find themselves without the same help and the same opportunity to develop as they once had.

Sympathy from a Distance

We spoke above about a gospel that needs to be in concrete and not abstract terms, about confronting the things that sin against people in places like Ruchazie, about the practical style of life here and about leadership. The need is for a greater Christian presence. More salt is required. For too long we have told people to change their ways, shouted from a safe distance, sent models and concepts from different culture that have in turn brought further oppression. For too long Christians in places like Ruchazie have been left to survive as best they could, and churches have been closed down because they could not keep things going in the way that the denomination demanded (even though these demands were built on expectations created in totally different contexts). For too long we have proclaimed ideas rather than realities. For too long we have failed to question whether it is right to accept that Christians will use their resources better (which is, after all, good stewardship), and so move out and away from poorer communities. For too long we have

assumed that others should remain in areas like Ruchazie and not given them any good example of our own willingness to serve in that kind of way. For too long we have assumed that teaching materials, resources for worship, styles of being should just be duplicated in poorer areas, and would in fact work well if only the people there could learn to be reliable, dependable, *etc.* For too long we have supposed that sympathy and some solemn prayer is the only support we can offer to people working in housing estate parishes. For too long we have been unconcerned at the disparity of church resources in our cities, and the crippling effect that this has on mission. For too long we have not even noticed the unevenness of resources, or have simply accepted it as the nature of things. For too long we have assumed that going the second mile is opening our chequebooks ('greater love has no man than this...').

We have a few people who, because of the call of God, have chosen to move in to Ruchazie. We have a few who, because of the call of God, have chosen to stay. They have been an enormous source of strength and encouragement. The tragedy is that this is still so exceptional. It is nice to have others' prayers and good to have their financial support. What we really need is some company – not the Church paying more full-time employees to work here, not gestures of support from a distance, but Christians who are prepared to be here to live here as part of the commission to go into all the world. When Jesus gave the commission, do we suppose he really meant 'Go where it is safe' or 'Go where there is a decent class of people'? Surely his own going to the forgotten, the despised, the outcasts rules out that interpretation, but though we would never say that that is what Jesus meant, that is how we take his words. And while the salt remains predominantly in the middle-class areas it is only to be expected that mission in the poorer urban areas will suffer. There is a big mission field in our cities. It is a tragedy that so few think it important enough to go there. I wonder

if Jesus thinks it is important? We would be delighted to have more join us, to respond to the call and challenge to be salt and light in places like Ruchazie. Come and live, come and serve. Needy areas? Yes, for salt and light. A difficult work? Yes, and all the more so, the more we neglect areas like this. Most of all we need some company.