

## **I. Introduction and Background to the *Cities of Culture* Conference**

The Core Cities Theology Network is an embryonic organisation that has come together through practitioners in Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield and Newcastle upon Tyne wanting to share experiences in predominantly northern English cities and explore themes of theological reflection on the church and its practices. The purpose of the network was stated early on and suggests that it would:

create an environment of solidarity and support for those engaged in urban mission and public policy so that more effective ways of being the church in the core cities context might be enabled.

Lunchtime conferences were held in each of the four cities represented to which around one hundred persons, lay and ordained, and of all denominations, attended to identify common experiences and themes. Provisional aims were formulated that gave a steer to the format the network might take:

1. to reflect theologically on the experience of being the church in different English Core Cities, each of which is experiencing huge changes in physical space, political and cultural identity and in social and economic arenas;
2. to share good practice with regard to the mission and identity of the church in new contexts of urban plurality and restructuring.

Out of the lunchtime meetings in the four Core Cities it was identified that a residential conference to explore the renaissance of culture in northern Core Cities as a means of regeneration of both city centres and local communities would be a means of both taking issues raised forward and also catalysing the growth of the network at an early stage in its development.

The conference had four aims, which were to:

1. understand the power of 'culture' as a force that is shaping the regeneration of urban areas and which faith communities now need to address;
2. respond and reflect upon the CULF document published in May 2006 in the light of the 'culture' agenda;
3. attract both grassroots users of cities and urban spaces as well as those engaged in reflecting and shaping them;
4. inaugurate a UK-based Core Cities Theological Network, starting with those northern English cities that attended the conference.

The conference was to have three processes evident within it:

1. letting stories emerge from the grassroots about engagement with an attitude towards culture;
2. listening to alternative visions for the city and culture;
3. setting an agenda for future work on this topic.

Thirty-five delegates gathered at Scargill House in the Yorkshire Dales on 12<sup>th</sup> September for a forty eight hour residential conference with the title *Cities of Culture: whose Vision, which Agenda?* The opening session of the conference was entitled *Voices from the Cities*, and the stories of Liverpool and Newcastle upon Tyne were told alongside some reflections from London and Glasgow. A keynote address from Professor Elaine Graham set the overall picture, rooted in the understanding of cities found in the recently published *Faithful Cities*.

The second part of the conference focused on *Visions of the City* and an 'official' view from Paul Collard was set alongside a grassroots perspective given by Barbara Glasson and John Bradbury. A keynote address by Professor Timothy Gorringer offered some theological reflections on culture. During the final morning delegates identified motifs and issues that could be carried forward from the conference to assist practitioners in Core Cities.

This conference report aims to make the proceedings of the conference available to a wider audience than simply the participants. In part it provides the full texts of speakers, at other points it contains summaries written by participants. It ends with a summary of the motifs and issues that the conference identified as being worthy of further reflection, and then a personal reflection by one of the delegates. It is hoped that the contents of the report will be valuable in itself as a reference to what was articulated but also as a way of creating an agenda for future pieces of work.