

## 2. Voices from the Cities

### 2.1 Voices from Liverpool

*Representatives from Liverpool contributed reflections from their own experience of engaging with culture in the city of Liverpool. First of all John Fielding, of the United Reformed Church writes:*

Liverpool, 'the pool of life', has always been an exciting place, but it is particularly exciting at the moment – our winning the title European Capital of Culture has had an energizing effect on the life of the city. The city centre is described as one of the most rapidly regenerating in Europe. Building and refurbishment of former warehouses as living accommodation is growing rapidly. Businesses are moving to Liverpool: the Liverpool Daily Post reported that in the first year of becoming 'City of Culture' the number of super-rich in Merseyside increased by 44% bringing the total number of millionaires to 3,257 and investment in the city was increasing. The café and club culture has spawned a host of new restaurants, bars and coffee shops throughout the city centre and into the more affluent suburbs.

We've got two football teams, we've got two cathedrals - are there two cities? A city of the wealthy, a city of the poor? I recently drove from my home in Mossley Hill to the north part of our city. It was like driving through three different worlds: from leafy suburbia through a glitzy city centre to an area of blight and dereliction just off the Scotland Road.

Much of the City of Culture promotion is comprised of 'spin' and is 'cosmetic' with a kind of 'theme park' image. What we see in our city is the commodification and commercialisation of culture and the packaging and rebranding of the city. People in the inner city and the outer estates feel that there is a concentration of activity and regeneration in the city centre while levels of poverty in the streets and inner city neighbourhoods show little or no signs of improvement. Unemployment is still more than twice the national average. An estimated 43% of households live in poverty or on its margins. The standard mortality rate is 44% above the national figure. Someone complained to me recently that his local pub had recently become a funeral parlour! A recent article in Liverpool Daily Post announced that the gap between rich and poor in our city is the highest in the UK.

Regeneration often displaces poverty, crime and exclusion to other parts of the city and fails to address underlying causes. Short term schemes proliferate.

The vision for Liverpool appears to have become focused on attracting high income outsiders to visit exclusive shops, attend conferences, theatres and art galleries and live in expensive apartments. Many local people naturally feel excluded from all this. How can being Capital of Culture change things? Can culture regenerate us?

*Another perspective on Liverpool came from John Davies, a Church of England priest, who contributed under the title 'Reading Everyday Culture':*

I live and work among the people of Norris Green and Croxteth, large outer city housing estates built in the middle years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Currently our area's most famous cultural exports are Wayne Rooney and Colleen McLoughlin, who remain, with their families, very rooted in and committed to their home despite their new-found celebrity and their mansion in Cheshire.

Local people here, five miles out of the centre, tend to regard Liverpool's Capital of Culture status as having little relevance to them. While the Duke of Westminster's lauded 'Big Dig' transforms the city centre, Norris Green contains the Boot Estate, consisting of substandard ex-council stock being too slowly cleared for long-promised but as yet undelivered better

houses, the subject of long-running Council Chamber scandals. And while the inner area of Liverpool is (creatively) repopulated, the city as a whole continues to shrink, demonstrated most clearly by the ever-widening spaces in areas like ours.

Norris Green has nurtured other popular celebrities, among them Coronation Street actors Jean Alexander (Hilda Ogden) and Geoffrey Hughes (Eddie Yates). In their time these characters were either sniffed at for their 'commonness', or warmly accepted and loved for their everyday appeal, which illustrates to me the shape which the cultural agenda must take in a very 'ordinary' place like this.

When I arrived here I was struck by the place's ordinariness – nothing apparently special or particular about these estates. But I was also struck by the cultural blindness which that revealed in me. I began to follow an instinct that 'ordinariness' is not a bad word, that mundane things must also have cultural meaning and relevance and that richness and complexity must lie beneath the surface of everyday life. And to explore that I began to embark on a series of walks around the parish: slow deliberate walks, with notebook and camera, which I journalled online and to which I invited comments, additions and critiques from local people. Over time, a rich picture of life here did indeed begin to develop.<sup>1</sup>

In our place a large proportion of men work – in transportation or construction – out of white vans, and many women walk to and from bus stops in the uniform of their cleaning companies or supermarkets. As Christians, concerned with justice we ought to use our *prophetic* voices in the arenas of regeneration and employment, where, from a Norris Green perspective, inequalities are very evident. It strikes me that the work of the church here should also involve affirming and celebrating the cultures of our local people's lives, often marginalised, or worse, *derided* by mainstream media culture. And finding the *wisdom* words to express the spirituality latent – sometimes vibrant – here.

That was the rationale behind my recent series of *Thoughts for the Day* on BBC Radio Merseyside, in which I read a series of 'common prayers' around everyday culture and its icons: wheelie bins, bus stops, mobile phone masts, traffic lights and shopping trollies, and which were very well received:

*We give thanks for the bus stop:  
Place of waiting and encounter*

*A sign which guides us towards our destination, a bench on which we meet, a shelter from the wind and rain, a place of light in the darkness.*

*A blessing on those who wait quietly for the early buses to carry them into work; silent companions in the regular routine;*

*A blessing on those who stand chatting in the off-peak times; twirlies\*, shoppers, those carrying babes in arms, excitable toddlers;*

*A blessing on those who stand alone, watched by the faces of passing car riders, feeling a little beside themselves;*

*We give thanks for the bus stop:  
Place of waiting and encounter*

*Help us to understand the anxiety of others which causes some to jump the queue;*

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.johndavies.org/> for more information

*Help us to understand the zestfulness of others – especially when the buses are suddenly packed with shouting, laughing, wriggling schoolchildren;*

*Help us to understand the needs of others – giving up our seat for those struggling on their feet.*

*Praise for the fellowship of our fellow- travellers, enquiring about the timing of the buses, sharing today's news and views;*

*Praise for the patience of the drivers, putting up with slow ones, arrogant ones, non-payers, those who get on without any change.*

*We salute the advertisers who brighten up the bus stops with colourful posters – and forgive them their intention to part us from our money;*

*We salute the youngsters who turn bus stops into gathering places in the evening – and forgive them their noise, disturbing others around.*

*We give thanks for the bus stop:  
Place of waiting and encounter*

\*A twirly is a pensioner asking a bus driver if they can get on a bus free of charge before their 9.30 bus pass start time: 'am I too early?'

## **2.2 Voices from Newcastle**

*The presentation from Newcastle was given by seven members of the Newcastle Diocesan Urban Task Group: Chris Knights from Scotswood, Julia Bebbington from Cowgate, Meg Fisher from West Denton, Helen Gill from Percy Main in North Tyneside, Peter Robinson from the east end, Jenny Lancaster from Walker and Allison Fenton from Newcastle Cathedral. They were joined by Ray Angelsea, a Planning specialist and a non-stipendiary minister from the United Reformed Church working in Newcastle. In summary, Peter Robinson writes.*

Newcastle upon Tyne has a population of around 270,000 a figure now stabilised after recent years of decline. In 2003 the city, working with Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council, eagerly submitted a bid for the European Capital of Culture bid, as one of a range of initiatives designed to re-invent the city. Although the bid was unsuccessful, culture has remained a key driver for regeneration. The emphasis is on large projects in the Quayside area in both Newcastle and Gateshead. Landmark projects such as Baltic, the international centre for contemporary art, the Sage Music Centre and the Millennium Bridge now compete for attention along a half mile stretch of the River Tyne with Quayside apartments that market 24/7 living for those who can afford the investment.

During the development of the bid of the European Capital of Culture 2008 a number of clergy were in conversation with the Bid Team and the Faith Leaders Group supported a project proposal that would have been developed had the overall bid been successful and the promised resources released. A central concern was always the 'doughnut effect', or in other words, the realisation that increasing investment on the Quayside was producing a ring of inner-city communities that at best experienced exclusion or, at worst, was either demolished or colonised by creeping gentrification. The voices that the Newcastle presentation brought to the foreground were largely from this ring of excluded communities. However, they also included a perspective from the city centre and from a

community in the middle of North Tyneside representing the impact of culture not on the city but on the city-region.

For the presenters, the lament of Jimmy Nail's song *Big River* articulated the nostalgia of many local communities and the sense that culture in its post-industrial setting was not yet capturing the imagination.

*This was a big river  
I want you all to know  
That I was proud  
This was a big river  
But that was long ago  
That's not now, that's not now.*<sup>2</sup>

Hosting major international conferences does not seem to make up for the anticipation of the latest ship launch, the presence of the Millennium Bridge does not match the majesty of the cranes at Swan Hunters, sold off to the highest bidder and due to reassembled in an Indian shipyard.

Each community that contributed to the presentation demonstrated culture's far-reaching nature. The post-industrial community of Scotswood has recently been demolished and lies desolate, something that began as the bid for European Capital of Culture 2008 gained momentum. The central north west community of Cowgate has many families who have roots in the Newcastle Quayside as it was in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; it is a place where memories still exist of displacement to make way for something else. Byker is barely a mile from the city centre but increasingly riverside apartments are obscuring the view into its well-known Byker Wall estate and the contrast between multimillion pound investment on the Quayside and Byker's multiple deprivation is stark. Like Byker, Walker on the outer eastern edge of the city boundary is becoming a multi-ethnic community as asylum seekers, refugees and economic migrants settle; but alongside the many positive stories of integration there are also problems to do with racism and violence, and the BNP is active in local communities. Percy Main stands just north of the River Tyne in North Tyneside, but the reach of cultural regeneration is felt even here as the employment market is re-shaped and further across, on the North Sea coast, Whitley Bay appears to want to cash in on the perceived opportunities of the cultural agenda. The city centre itself is now renowned as being one of the 'party city' capitals of Europe but the clash of understandings of what culture actually is, is all too evident on Friday nights in the Bigg Market, as revellers rub shoulders with those who have spent the evening at the Theatre Royal. Ray Angelsea, who currently works with the charity *Planning Aid*, encouraged a positive view of the cultural life of the city centre and challenged local communities to take a perspective that engaged with change in the north east, much of which is not only inevitable but also potentially life-giving.

The Newcastle presentation ended with some questions about the impact of culture on local communities and the city-region.

1. Does culture equate with 'the Arts'?
2. Architecture and urban design: are they part of 'culture'?
3. How do we stop ourselves from sinking into caricaturing 'cultures'?
4. How would gaining European Capital of Culture 2008 have affected Scotswood/Cowgate/Byker? If only Newcastle-Gateshead had won!
5. Can you sell culture?
6. What do we mean by 'culture' and 'cultures'?

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<sup>2</sup> Jimmy Nail, *Big River*, East West, Audio CD, 1995

7. What is Geordie 'culture'?
8. Are there bad cultures as well as good ones - and who decides which is which?
9. Who evaluates what 'culture' is, and how?
10. Can culture change people? (for the better?)

### 2.3 A Response from London

*Andrew Davey is the Urban Affairs Adviser to the Church of England and also the author of Urban Christianity and Global Order (London: SPCK, 2001). He was asked to give a response to cultural issues from a London perspective.*

#### 2.3.1 Culture, Identity and Inclusivity

We need to ask some basic questions about cities of culture: what is the culture that creates the drive for cities of culture? What is culture in an era when the lives and economy of our cities are driven by real estate? Is culture becoming a commodity or is it (social) capital in some way?

Culture is now tied up closely with identity. A Core City is now a 'city of .....

We have talked about 'trickle down' or 'trickle out' for too long. The reality is that cities are experiencing 'urban diabetes', as the present Bishop of Liverpool, the Rt Rev'd James Jones has said, and questions need to be asked about the mechanisms that are now needed to overcome this effect.

There is an increasing ambiguity or ambivalence about the impact that regeneration will have beyond the city core. Where is support given to the culture of informal spaces or the events of everyday life? Who are big ticket events dependant on? Are we now assuming a new servant (migrant) class? Is an ethical Olympics (in terms of living wage, fair employment and so on) the same as an inclusive Olympic games? We need to pay more attention to the recent experiences of the Olympics in Seoul, Barcelona and Athens. In particular, we need to address the male labour crisis (the *Full Monty* syndrome) and recognise that there are no quick fit solutions.

A way forward might be for the conference to ask, 'who are the key players?' in the emerging cities of culture? Recently three social groups have been identified, each of which plays a key part in determining the shape of such cities: <sup>3</sup>

1. new urban citizens – young, single (or older) child-free moving back to the cities with high consumption life styles;
2. day visitors and tourists who are accessing specialised retail and entertainment quarters;
3. the creative class (Florida's *bohós*) - city living entrepreneurs.

Another resource for the conference might well be the work of the historian Tristram Hunt whose book *Building Jerusalem*<sup>4</sup> can help us gain a perspective on early 21<sup>st</sup> century Core Cities. Hunt comments on the difference between the Victorian 'city of culture' and the city of today:

<sup>3</sup> Graeme Evans and Jo Foord, 'Small Cities for a Small Country' in David Bell and Mark Jayne, eds., *Small Cities: Urban Experience beyond the Metropolis* (London: Routledge, 2006)

<sup>4</sup> Tristram Hunt, *Building Jerusalem* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2003)

....it is again suggested that culture is the pillar of an urban civilisation. But there is a difference. Whereas nineteenth-century middle-class civic culture was more often than not the product of a Nonconformist conscience, the culture of today's cities appears more of a branding and marketing tool than a reflection of civic identity. It is frequently the work of quangos and urban regeneration consultants rather than the organic outcome of any home-grown civic sentiment.<sup>5</sup>

Hunt cites Jonathan Glancey, the Architecture Correspondent of the Guardian, on the way that the Victorian city had created urban culture out of its industrial enterprise. Now however, 'instead of culture springing from the inner workings of our cities, we see it as the way to make our cities work'. Hunt goes on to say:

....the culture of Victorian cities was just as carefully manufactured as the 2003 bids. The difference then was that it was an indigenous circle of middle-class civic patriots who co-ordinated the function, whereas all too frequently today culture is generated by metropolitan professionals, characterized by one newspaper as 'men in rectangular glasses with business cards', with only the loosest of ties to the civic environment. Cultural policy is essential to regenerating post-industrial cities, but urban culture will only emerge with local talent and local patronage. And for that to happen people need to move back to the cities and stay there.<sup>6</sup>

### **2.3.2 Regeneration and Competition**

What actually is culture in the global arena? Who are the global players driving this agenda? When you are walking past a building site look at the hoardings *Lend Lease*, *Bovis*, *AEG* – and when you get home look at their websites and find out where their other interests are to be found.

The regeneration industry attempts to identify economic drivers that will bring new investment into the city through making it an attractive environment for locating the command functions of global corporations and the new knowledge and information-based industries. This is part of the competitive world in which cities now operate. Culture, built environment, environmental and infrastructure improvements are the vanguard of the changes. This is the role of culture, in the broadest sense, because this can include a wide range of tourist attractions, higher education and arts venues, designed by what Leonie Sandercock calls *STARcitects*. The assumption is that new identities might give cities a competitive advantage, attracting new resources and businesses in an environment where sports-obsessed executives can thrive alongside their arts-orientated spouses.

Intervention and planning in cities is becoming increasingly complex and often ineffective. Competitiveness between cities has increased as they seek elusive status as the bases of globalised services or command centres for production. Economic forecasting becomes increasingly difficult as capital, resources and personnel flow across borders, and production is dispersed. Commodification and the market are increasingly apparent in the competitive drive for the renewal of urban economies, castes of global regeneration gurus and architects, and the introduction of market forces into third sector involvement in urban communities.

The Core City agenda is significant in its view of competitiveness in a European framework. Ministers talk of league table for cities and regions. Cities are desperate to be global. The

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<sup>5</sup> Hunt, *Building Jerusalem*, p.246

<sup>6</sup> Hunt, *Building Jerusalem*, p.350

metropolitan areas we are concerned with in the Cities of Culture conference are not those in the higher tiers of the Saskia Sassen hierarchies of cities.<sup>7</sup>

John Rennie Short uses the designation 'globalizing' to capture this dynamic. *Globalising cities* captures 'that sense of becoming and longing. Globalising cities are both global cities seeking to maintain their position and non-global cities seeking to become global cities. The terms are not permanent unchanging verities, but relational, spectral, temporal, shifting and unstable'.<sup>8</sup>

The Core City attraction must be that they are *not* London: they must not be pale imitators of the capital, and yet paradoxically hard branding of the Core City has led to a certain amount of cloning and imitation of each other. This shift has often sapped 'local' capacity and creativity. If the search for 'big events' and new facilities now dominate metropolitan strategies then bidding for sports events, cultural years, casinos and so on can divert a city's agenda for a significant period. We need also to note that there is often no 'Plan B'.

A sense of place can decline as uniformity is imposed as an asset in terms of facilities, while the culture of competition wastes or diverts substantial resources. We can see changes in the type of culture that thrives in the global world of corporate philanthropy. Local institutions lose out to national and regional facilities, or global touring exhibitions or productions. A key question is whether a real estate orientated city can produce playfulness?

We also see the privatisation of previously public culture and spaces: the imposition of cultural strategies that often marginalize or strangle those people and projects which emerge 'from below'.

### **2.3.3 Emerging from Below**

So what signs of resistance are there? Who is producing an alternative narrative? It could well be that the following are doing just this:

- the urban expressive cultures of the black British communities
- the football leagues of Hispanic communities
- the cycling assemblies inspired by Critical Mass
- the new takes on urban street life or literary imaginations (*Mis-guides*, *Smoke* etc)
- *artmongers* - visualising community in hoardings
- *The Hackney Exploratory* and other projects making planning people's work and child's play.

And the church? How do we locate ourselves in all this? What is the culture, what are the rumours we are called to keep alive in the shadows of urban life? How do we support and inform the vocations of Christians involved in shaping our cities?

An answer needs to recognise the church's local and global presence in our urban areas, amidst the rich and poor, amidst ethnic diversity, often disputed or in need of negotiation. With access to a number of levels in political and social life the church finds itself confronted by many demands and seductions in relation to prevailing geopolitical realities. An awareness of location is vital to our task of discernment, placing our bodies and minds at the critical places in our societies, or discovering the implications of the places (and flexible alternative networks) where we are already called to be Christian disciples.

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<sup>7</sup> Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001)

<sup>8</sup> John Rennie Short, *Global Metropolitan: Globalizing Cities in a Capitalist World* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.2

Hilary Russell recently drew my attention to some words of Tony Dyson. He says the Church needs to be:

searching for, holding to, living and struggling, and dying in, the creative centre of culture...not an artistic conception, nor is it a geographical location. It is found at those critical points in society where God's creativity and redemptive acts are contending with forces of meaninglessness, dispersion, disorder and despair...To be and to persist, to bear portions of the world's sufferings, to fall and be picked up, to seek to be 'salt' and 'light' at these points, in the day to day fabric of our human lives, is the common Christian calling.<sup>9</sup>

Hopefully in the next 48 hours we will catch glimpses and some clues as to the possible forms for our presence and participation in the life of the city, whether those forms are coalitions of place-based communities, pan-city alliances and networks, or innovative struggle-focused movements. Prophetic spatial struggles become a critical embodiment of God's new order breaking in and confronting the failure of our human institutions and structures. Our participation in cycles of struggle is the critical core of our urban mission: it is in the midst of the urban throng that worship and the sacraments can be offered, as acts of proclamation and solidarity.

We may glimpse new possibilities of churches and communities bound through an alternative urban praxis that refuses to be content with the crumbs that fall from the lean city. In particular we must ask, how do we use our footholds in education, community and the civic imagination?

This is a struggle for grace to flourish.....

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<sup>9</sup> Anthony Dyson, 'Clericalism, Church and Laity' in *All are called: Towards a Theology of Laity* (London: CIO, 1985), p.16