

6. Reflections on the Themes from *Cities of Culture*: Setting the Agenda

6.1 Motifs

Throughout the discussions and plenary session, it was possible to discern a number of related and recurring themes. Among these, and not surprisingly in view of the conference title, culture featured as a major concern. Without making sharp distinctions between traditional notions of high vs. popular culture, there was general agreement that culture should be life-giving, reflecting our human capacity and desire for creativity, transcendence and playfulness. In a similar way, there was a strong affirmation of the need for inter-personal and professional relationships that celebrate the diversity of the city, offering genuine hospitality rather than mere tolerance of difference. Openness to the other in its varied forms, combined with a readiness to learn, constitute the best ways of understanding how things really are in the urban. We are also called to affirm the built environment in all its complexity. This requires a capacity for hard thought, the discipline to resist easy or ill-judged conclusions and a principled pragmatism concerning the readiness to work in partnership with others. The religion of the Incarnation challenges us to see structures of grace operating outside religious institutions and to paraphrase one plenary contribution, 'not all urban planners are evil and not all local communities are wonderful.'

The local church should aim to retain a faithful and creative presence, alert to the wider issues that are shaping the cultural agenda without compromising its own distinctive or prophetic voice. This requires us to recognise that culture can never be understood simply in terms of pleasure, profit or power – entertainment, lots of laughs and a vibrant local economy – and should never be divorced from the deeper question of how culture promotes social capital, justice and forms of regeneration that go beyond bricks and mortar.

The task of how we minister in the urban and the integrity we bring to this role will have much to do with our willingness to remain *embedded* – staying and serving, bearing burdens and, whenever possible, building bridges that promote human well-being. To do all this, a robust theology is called for: *practical* in the best sense of discerning what 'life in all its fullness' (St John 10:10) might mean at street level and *public* insofar as its concerns reflect the basic *kingdom* conviction that the gospel embraces the whole of creation. Such a broad canvas requires prayerful reflection and a readiness 'to discern the Spirit' in the shaping of priorities. It also calls for the humility and resilience which recognise that the urban agenda, rather like the scriptural mandate to 'read the signs of the times', is never finished. Such a theological/philosophical world view draws confidence from a future hope and the belief that God 'works in all sorts of people'. Risk therefore can be embraced positively along with the inevitability of change and the duty to resist the safe and predictable. Practical outcomes and agreed targets to promote the cultural agenda remain important but nothing matters so much as the shared task of keeping local communities human, civil and hopeful. These values are integral to the notion of faithful capital and what local churches *are for* in the urban. They also raise the bar concerning what culture *is for* and the extent to which it reflects and encourages the best in human aspirations.

6.2 Issues

Within the Issues section of the *Setting the Agenda* discussion the following five themes emerged within a creative dialogue:

The theme of **the City** not surprisingly became the platform upon which much dialogue was built. The 'City' with a capital 'C' was that part of urban change that reflected the dynamic entrepreneurial city which we all recognised as a template for cultural regeneration – the 'buzz' synonymous with the energy and creativity of a city 'on the up'. However, alongside the 'City' lies the city with the small 'c' – those areas waiting to be regenerated and which

exhibit the characteristics of a 'wasteland' – both in the physical and emotional sense – 'groups of dysfunctional people dumped together' as one delegate puts it. Whilst recognising the importance of economic regeneration and human creativity that cities can achieve, the conference reaffirmed the equal significance of a justice-based and people-focused approach to the culture agenda. Regeneration of a city includes the regeneration of all its people - and is epitomised in long-term relationships based on trust and commitment, and a more equal sharing of power. We recognised the need to develop a definition of what we meant by the city – in geographical, socio-economic as well as theological terms.

Engaging with the structures of urban regeneration was a persistent issue that covered many layers: first was the importance of engaging with professional regenerators in ways that did not demonise them, but moved away from 'them and us' terminology to create safe places for strategic decision-makers to reflect on what they are doing. Second, was the commitment to develop a common understanding of what 'culture' means and take time to understand the mindsets that govern the work of decision makers? The third layer allowed us as churches to identify the values that underpin the culture/regeneration agenda, promoting the spiritual dimension of regeneration and affirming the value of the culture that already exists in urban communities. Fourth, recognising the times when we are called to give an account of how and when power is used in an oppressive or exploitative way under the auspices of 'culture'. Fifth, building credible local structures within communities (including faith groups) capable of undertaking the roles identified above. Overall, the verb to cultivate was offered as a clue to how we as churches should engage with those who influence the cultural agenda.

A third theme was **the role and identity of church within the cultural agenda debate**. At a **political level**, many saw the church as a resource to support, educate and resource faith-based representatives in strategic partnerships; playing the role of critical friend in partnership forums; creating spaces for dialogue but also places where the vulnerable and powerful actually meet. How do we 'capitalise' on our faithful capital to create the right sort of glue to hold communities and political processes together? At an **educational level**, potential city ministers (both lay and ordained) should be trained in ways that are narrative, contextual, scriptural and collaborative. At an **ecumenical level** to promote more meaningful inter- and intra-faith dialogue to forge common goals and develop common strategies, whilst at the same time maintaining a positive sense of Christian identity. These responses however, depend on the church being able to change and adapt its own way of working – for example, how might 'high', 'popular' and 'folk' categories of culture impact on our ways of being church?

Local church was seen by many as the place where these principles are already being put into practice – for example, the role of worship in creating spaces of dialogue, diversity and shaping a moral and practical vision of the common good by bringing together the different 'stories' of the community. Local churches are spaces where prayers are said for the city, where local congregations model good practice of civil society, and where a congregation's practical wisdom (*phronesis*) is being applied for the greater good. Local Christians will walk the city/parish with a 'tutored' eye and create the space to reflect on what they have seen.

A fourth theme focused on the **impact the City of Culture agenda** on community space. Many poor communities are struggling to cope physically and intellectually with powerful influxes of global populations seeking work or asylum, whilst being simultaneously labelled as inadequate and stigmatised. In respect of the much-used concept of 'capacity-building' delegates wanted a dynamic understanding of the term to be adopted (rather than the current overtone of being 'done unto') but also to ask what sort of capacity within communities is being addressed by regeneration?

Finally, various **theological** themes emerged. It was proposed that we articulate a theology that recognises that power, wealth and knowledge are not bad in themselves; a theology that is both incarnational (i.e. embedded and valorising of local communities) and eschatological (i.e. looking forward to what might be salvific within emerging patterns of culture, city and society); the recognition that regeneration is a common word between faiths and a useful foundation for interfaith dialogue about its theological impact when applied to new urban space; a suggestion that Paul Collard and Tim Gorringer had modelled different theological stances in relation to the culture agenda – Paul was more positive about the beneficial impact of the creative agenda on both city centres and local communities, whereas Tim was more committed to honouring the local ‘folk’ culture that already exists; there was a call to rediscover ‘creative pneumatology’ - seeing the work of the Spirit within the cultural fabric of cities and its potential to bring new insights and transformations. Finally, the concept of ‘added value’ was interpreted theologically as the distinctive gift that churches bring as an ‘output’ to the cultural and regeneration debate – namely ‘life in all its fullness’ (John 10: 10).

6.3 Personal Reflections from Alison Micklem

When the Core Cities Theological Network started over two years ago, I attended a lunchtime meeting in Liverpool but never followed it up.

However, when I received the details of the Conference ‘Cities of Culture: Whose Vision, Which Agenda?’ I thought it would be very valuable to attend. For one thing, with Liverpool being the European Capital of Culture for 2008, the theme was very relevant, and for another, we were going to spend some time looking at the report *Faithful Cities*. Having attended a couple of events linked to the research that went into compiling the report and received regular internet mailings while the work has been in progress, I was interested to have the opportunity to discuss the end result with some of those involved. I have also read some of Tim Gorringer’s work and did not want to miss the opportunity to hear him speak.

The event itself did not disappoint. All the guest speakers were excellent, and in some of the less formal sessions it was fascinating to hear how Glasgow, a former European Capital of Culture, and Newcastle, who were hotly tipped to win the 2008 nomination, tackle many of the issues facing Liverpool. Having representatives from other cities for whom the ‘Capital of Culture’ topic is of little or no interest, but who still face the same issues of physical and economic regeneration, helped keep things in perspective. We heard many stories of how local congregations and projects have tried to engage (with varying degrees of success) with the processes influencing their immediate environment, and how some clergy and other church ‘professionals’ have become involved at more strategic levels.

It was a slight pity that the event was dominated by the Church of England, because their perspective and experience is not necessarily shared by the smaller denominations, and particularly not by solely ‘gathered’ congregations. However many stories one hears, none of them exactly reflect one’s own experience, but it is good to get as diverse a range as possible. I hope that the Core Cities Theological Network will develop and broaden over the next few years.

The material presented and discussed at the conference covered a broad sweep of issues and approaches. Personally, I felt that the scope was possibly a bit too broad, and we didn’t have time to go into anything in enough detail. However, I think that was because it was the first residential gathering of the network, and the organisers wanted to test the waters and see what people found most useful, to help shape future events. In any case, it is always good to be left wanting more! I came away with a whole range of new contacts, a lot of ideas to ponder, some new books to read, and a firm (though as yet unfulfilled!) resolution to revisit some old ones. I think it is all too easy for practitioners to get so caught up in activity that

reflection gets pushed to the side, so I valued the opportunity to do some serious theological reflection, and the expert help in doing it.

Altogether, I would rate the conference as very worthwhile. I was reminded of many things I already know, challenged by the realisation of large areas of ignorance, and encouraged to learn more.