



UCSG newsletter

supporting urban URC churches in Thames North and Southern synods

Things are changing at UCSG. After over 12 years in post Sandra Ackroyd is retiring as coordinator and James Ashdown and John Danso will also be stepping down. The work of UCSG, however, will be carrying on. John Campbell will be working quarter time with UCSG whilst also being minister of High Cross URC and a similar post is being arranged in Southern Synod. A Network of Urban Practitioners will also play an important role in developing the work

Seeds of Hope -- stories of community work from UCSG

This new publication from UCSG tells stories from London and beyond of grassroots community work being done by ordinary people in ordinary churches.

"This selection of stories immediately grabbed me, threw me on a number 38 bus, and transported me to a host of familiar places. From musty church halls to fraying community centres, I'm introduced to recognizable people and projects where generous hospitality is mixed with organization, imagination and action."

We are therefore having a special edition of the newsletter reflecting on the work of UCSG. To begin with Sandra reflects theologically on the work of the group

Theological reflection on the work of UCSG

When I think of the urban communities and churches the UCSG have related to in the past 10 years and those I personally have lived in and worshipped in for my whole adult life, I can see so much to rejoice about and also weep about. Do you ever think about why Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem (Luke 19 vv 41 – 42)? This reminds us of Nehemiah (Nehemiah 1 v 4) weeping before his great vision about the restoration of Jerusalem. In the church, do we weep about the right things or do we spend energy and time complaining about minor things. Do we weep about our city, town, community and the needs of the people there? I believed Jesus was weeping about the people of Jerusalem. His heart and mind went out to them and he felt compassion for them, not judgement. He wanted them to understand the things that would give them inner peace and peace in society.

In his manifesto to the people in the Nazareth synagogue when he quoted from the prophet Isaiah, Jesus pronounced that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him because he had been anointed to preach good news to the poor; to heal the broken hearted; freedom to those in different kinds of captivity; to recover sight to people who are blind and to set free the people who are oppressed and damaged (Luke 4 v.18). When I read this passage today in an urban context I think of the people who are poor economically and who are experiencing deprivation in so many other ways; those who suffer from chronic illnesses; asylum seekers; those who

are disadvantaged because of racism and classism; vulnerable people; young people and children facing manifold struggles; people who are judged by the majority in society because they are thought to be irregular in some kind of a way due to their immigration status, their sexuality etc.

I believe that Jesus' church would be embracing of all these people because his Kingdom was to be full of such. What went wrong? Where are all these people in our churches today? Actually many of them are in our urban churches but they are hidden. Remembering so many stories of Jesus' encounter with people, he seemed to spend much time with and drew in, those on the margins of society those frowned upon and excluded by others especially by the religious people, the Mary Magdalenes', the woman at the well of Sychar, the Zachaeus', the Blind Bartimaeus – those regarded as strangers because of having different faith and cultural backgrounds – those despised because of the job they did e.g. they were tax collectors or shepherds – those suffering from chronic illnesses, regarded as being nuisances, young people and children who were brushed aside but Jesus clearly said, "Do not send them away. My Kingdom is made up of such" (Matthew 18)

When Jesus said "I have come that you might have life, life in all its fullness" (John 10 v. 10) I believe that he meant all the kinds of people mentioned in his Manifesto to experience this fullness of life. This is the UCSG prayer for all those in our urban churches. In our urban communities there are a lot of poor and hungry people, hungry for food, hungry to belong, hungry for faith, hungry for learning and training. There are at the same time, people from all corners of the world who have brought with them many skills and cultural gifts, that has enriched many of our urban communities and churches. There is much to rejoice about. These stories need to be more widely told and listened to.

What stops us from being all embracing in the ways that Jesus meant us to be? What are the blocks that prevent us from relating to people in their different diversities? I would venture to say that if we do not confront these blockages and remove them, Christ's mission will continue to be hindered. One of the clearest examples of this can be found in the story of Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10 vv.1 – 35). One would assume that when Peter was touched by the Holy Spirit amongst all those other people on the day of Pentecost and also that he was technically the first of the apostles that he would have been cleansed of all prejudices. We can see that this was not the case. In fact those in our churches who say things like "We are all one in Christ", "We are all the same" and "We do not need to talk about differences if we are Christians". It would be beneficial for us all to study this narrative more closely. When I learnt about this story as I was growing up it was always referred to as the conversion of Cornelius, but what about all the details that led up to this? It is clear that until Peter confronted the prejudice within him (being a Jew and he could not eat with anyone who was not a Jew therefore unclean), then the conversion of Cornelius would never have happened. Peter had to face the issues posed in the dream head on and was given insight by God to understand the meaning for him. God had shown Peter, in the dream, that He/She had no favourites and treated all people on an equal basis. This was a conversion experience for Peter, which liberated him to go and share the Gospel with this gentile Cornelius.

As Christians we may need to go through many conversion experiences on our life and faith journey in order to deconstruct our prejudices in order to extend our mission. We all need to own our prejudices and even confess them in the way that Peter did before Cornelius.

Urban Christ

I follow
but it is hard to keep the track
Round corners
Down alleys
Always in the most unlikely parts of town

On the hills it is easier
I can see him from miles around

But here it is always glimpses in the crowd
Decisions at crossroads
Sight lines obscured by buildings
and encroaching buses

I follow the Urban Christ
but to the CCTV he is invisible
and of traffic lights he takes no notice

But he is at home here
Knows all the one-way streets and dead ends
He is quick as a cat, sharp as light

and if I am to follow
I must be patient
waiting
with eyes lit and ears trimmed

James Ashdown

Seeking the urban Christ has been central to my life for the past 25 years as I leave now to follow Jesus in the remoteness of mid Wales, I will remember UCSG with great affection because here was a place where the little people were given space and the small things paid attention to, but always within that great vision of the Kingdom of God.

The legacy

The UCSG website has a good collection of materials developed over the years and provides a good guide to what it has done. Here is a brief guide to some of what is available

<http://www.urbanchurches.org.uk/churchsecretariesconsult.htm>. Practical resources used at the church Secretaries consultations

<http://www.urbanchurches.org.uk/chronicillness.htm> Many practical and biblical resources from the chronic illness programme

<http://www.urbanchurches.org.uk/ucsgpapers.htm> Papers on many different subjects such as housing estates and urban and multicultural worship

Perspectives from the grassroots

Next two urban ministers share their experiences. Firstly Malachie Munyaneza reflects on the significance of UCSG and his hopes for its example to be shared more widely

UCSG for Gloucester!

For me, during my ministry within the Southern Synod the UCSG was like the voice of the constituting churches and a springboard for lay people's involvement in church life and witness. It is through the work of Urban Churches Support Group that people could liaise with others and lobby for an important event or issue. It was for me also a forum to discover gifted people who one could turn to for ideas and even pulpit supply. I believe that it is through its voice for trying to help weak churches recover and against a rush to sell redundant churches that the idea of regeneration project in the Southern Synod germinated and now they're becoming a place for social enterprise and continued witness in the community. Who knows where this can lead in the future? For me the Urban Churches Support Group was a fellowship that I miss a lot now, but that has influenced my approach to mission in the inner-city and where I am now, I am trying to share my experience with colleagues in the city of Gloucester. When I invited the coordinator of UCSG to take part in my induction service Gloucester, it was because I was also intending to invite the group to organize a minister's urban experience here in Gloucester as it happened in other cities. I hope this work will continue in my dream will come true. I believe that the group should be like the conscience of the two synods and should be supported even better than in the past.

Malachie Munyaneza was the former Minister of Brixton Hill and Stockwell Green 1999-2009

Lythan Nevard reflects on the day-to-day experience of Council estate ministry giving a good example of grassroots ministry which UCSG seeks to support and reflect upon

Estate ministry

As the TV show Stingray said in its intro 'Anything can happen in the next half hour'. This is true for estate ministry. When it comes to worship on a Sunday you can begin with four people and be interrupted by a person arriving in a wheelchair with a carer, a family with small children, some teenage lads (who looked bored but come every week even without their

parents), someone who shuffles him, someone who comes in wanting to hug and kiss the congregation even if you are in the middle of the prayer. The worship leader may end up having to preach with a baby on her hip. Or being heckled when something said isn't understood straightaway.

When it comes to trying to do things midweek it is tough as people are either working all the hours God gives or struggling with no work at all, or have dependents that need them. Which means everything has to be done on a small scale and slowly

It is frustrating

It is complicated and messy

It is raw and honest and breathtaking

It is hard work and just when you think you have it sussed, something happens and you have to learn all over again

Estates are full of people who are hungry– but might not be able to explain why they're hungry (although they often forthright in their views on everything else). Hungry for difference, hungry for change, hungry for equality, hungry for love. They need safe places to begin to learn that they are loved and grow in confidence in what that means for their lives. The church can be that place. Estates are often places where it is easy to cut services as these are people who don't know how to cause a public outcry, the church can show by its ongoing investment that it leaves in this place, even when everyone else has withdrawn, that it is committed to kingdom building here, and so help people give voice to their frustration in a way that can be heard.

Estates are not comfortable, pretty places but they are places where the love of God can be seen and the transforming light of his love makes them beautiful

John Danso

Many years of association with UCSG have added much richness to my ministry as a minister of the United Reformed Church.

I joined UCSG as a volunteer many years ago after my ordination into the ministry; even though I attended events organised by UCSG before I became fully involved. The highlight of UCSG activities for all these year has been the ***Cause for Celebration*** event which takes place in different churches each year. It is a time of rejoicing, reasoning and celebrating our diversity as a multicultural people. At Cause for Celebration event we enjoy and taste different kinds of food from different countries including UK. This was a fantastic experience I will never forget.

It was at one of such celebrations in 1996 when the gathered people from different churches of the URC realised the need for inclusiveness of our diversity as a as a multicultural church. Thus at that gathering a drafted resolution was passed and presented to URC General Assembly. Out of this resolution which was welcomed by the General Assembly a Racial Justice Secretary post was created. Marjorie Louise [Lewis?] Cooper was then appointed to that post. The work of Marjorie and the follow up of the previous resolution saw the URC declared itself at General Assembly a Multicultural Church in 2005. All these came out of UCSG activities.

My involvement in organising Cause for Celebration, and running workshops on Rites of Passage, Secretaries consultation and many other activities of the Group gave me the opportunity to enhance my Pastoral ministry. UCSG offered me the opportunity to work with friends and colleagues in bringing joy and hope to many ethnic minority people in the URC. In reality people like Sandra whom I was on the panel who interview her for the co-ordinator post, has indeed steered the UCSG to reach many people. Her work with the Group has really been very useful. Francis, James, and many others who served with the Group did inspire me as we worked together to bring hope and joy to all those who worship with URC, Methodist, Anglican, and Independent churches who attended UCSG events.

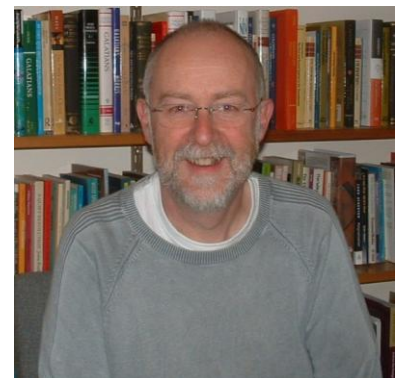
As I exit from UCSG for others to continue this inspiring work in the urban churches, I believe that the new experienced co-ordinator The Revd. Dr. John Campbell with his team will in no doubt bring more inspiration and joy to urban churches in London so that they may have voice, louder voice to proclaim the word of God in a way that will bring all people no matter their nationality, gender, and colour into the kingdom of God.

The Reverend John Danso

Looking to the future

The Rev. John Campbell will be taking over the coordination of UCSG in the future, here he introduces himself

Hi there! My name's John Campbell. I come originally from Glasgow but began my ministry with the United Reformed Church in London. I came originally in 1982 to work with the then Hackney Group of the United Reformed Church, having previously studied biology in St Andrews and in Birmingham and taught in a university in Nigeria for two years. Within the Hackney Group I pastored Manor Road URC and Upper Clapton URC and initially worked part-time for the Zebra Project, where I was succeeded by one James Ashdown. During my time in Hackney we worked closely with High Cross URC in Tottenham and I was trained for youth work by one Sandra Ackroyd. Just before I left London in 1990 for a 14-year ministry on an inner-city multi-cultural housing estate in Aston, Birmingham I can remember calling for a training course on diverse rites of passage for inner London ministers – sadly I left for Birmingham just before the first course was run.



So you see, although I've spent the last seven years of my life working for Northern College in Manchester, preparing people for the ministries of the United Reformed Church I do have a bit of previous in the inner city. Even in Manchester I've been living in Moss Side and served on the Governing Body of a local primary school and the board of an amazing church-based open youth project called the Hideaway. All in all, I'm eager to get back into urban church life in London, to discover what y'all have been up to whilst I was away and to see if any of the experiences I've picked up in Birmingham and Manchester can contribute anything to our shared soup pot of urban church liveliness.

See you all soon, John Campbell

Finally Sandra shares with us some challenges for the future

Issues that need a lot more reflection and examination

Migration:

This word is banded about as if it is some new theoretical concept rather than a reality existing since the beginning of time. The church has surely continued to benefit from different waves of migration through the years.

It is very true today, very much so in our two Synods where many of our churches not only have a large percentage of people of all ages from what we term minority ethnic backgrounds (mainly of Caribbean, African and Asian roots) but the leadership is also reflecting these backgrounds. Many of these churches are vibrant whether they are small, medium or large. After researching a small sample of churches(12) in 2010 I discovered that all were growing in terms of new worshippers and members. Are we taking this reality into consideration when our church leaders describe our denomination and decide on allocation of resources.

Regeneration:

Those who live in urban areas sometimes view the impact of regeneration differently from those who look at it from the outside. We have seen some examples of large regeneration projects that have taken place in London Boroughs that have actually disadvantaged the community rather than having brought a better life for people. Where we experience regeneration projects that directly involve churches these can be very exciting and we have a few exciting successes in our two synods. However I would like to ask the question, "What has happened to the congregations attached to these projects?" Is it possible for a local minister and even elders to be lured into spending most of their energy and time on the regeneration project and for the spiritual education; discipleships and development of leaderships in the congregation and pastoral opportunities to be neglected? As I referred to in the theology section, our urban congregations embrace vulnerable and disadvantaged people and their needs as well as those who have cultural riches, gifts and skills to share with the church. Our congregations could be thought of as the fishing boats that work, care, fish and feed. We could also see our larger regeneration church projects as flag ships. If regeneration initiatives are being explored in either synod, I believe UCSG should be asked to be part of the initial conversations, with a role of listening and amongst others asking hard questions. With limited worker time for UCSG, I believe any time spent on this aspect of work needs to be carefully controlled and that the urban congregations take priority.

Community Work Initiatives:

We were delighted and encouraged to discover, through some recent research carried out by James how many of our urban churches are involved in small but significant community work initiatives in which church members were engaging with people in the community on a regular basis in a face to face project. A booklet is currently being compiled by us telling the stories of some of these projects and there are many more out there. Again have we heard these stories or do we just hear about the big ones?

UCSG can...

Urban churches support group seeks to provide a range of resources, events and services specifically designed for churches operating in an urban environment -- whether that be a classic inner-city community, an outer estate or a more deprived part of an otherwise prosperous neighbourhood. Whilst most of our work is in London we are also keen to support work in urban communities outside London in the southeast.

We have done the following in the past:

- Advice and resources on setting up new projects
- Events addressing urban worship, mission and responses to violence
- Exploring the issue of chronic illness in urban churches
- Interim ministry to churches in pastoral transition
- Introductions to urban ministry for new ministers
- Non managerial supervision for community workers
- One-off consultations
- Ongoing support for church secretaries
- Ongoing training on multi-ethnic rites of passage
- Pastoral support for clergy and lay workers
- Promoting urban issues within the URC
- Support to churches threatened with closure or in crisis
- Theological reflection and practical guidance on estate ministry
- Theological resources on multicultural ministry
- Training for Elders
- Training to enable the multicultural church to address racism

etc...!

We have a range of skills as experienced ministers, community workers, trainers and youth workers available to support you in the exciting but challenging world of urban mission. We can offer a range of support from planned long-term interventions to occasional telephone support.

Our desire is to make sure that no local URC Church in Thames North and Southern Synods feels unsupported in its mission and ministry to urban communities

We do not yet have contact details for John Campbell but he can be reached through the synod offices or via our website www.urbanchurches.org.uk. For the time being Peter Stevenson, the minister at Crossway URC will be holding a watching brief for UCSG in the Southern Synod. peteisfulofun@btinternet.com 020 7703 7803 or 020 7708 0294

For more background on the Network of Urban Practitioners see <http://www.urbanchurches.org.uk/ucsgurbannetwork.htm>