

## FAITH IN THE CITY: Perspectives on Church and the City

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I count it as one of the privileges of my life that as a young parish priest in the Church of England that the Archbishops' Faith in the City Commission was established. I was Vicar of the Parish of Immanuel Highters' Heath, in Birmingham Diocese in 1985 when the Archbishops' Report "Faith in the City" was published. The then Archbishop of Canterbury, The Most Revd Robert Runcie, established the Commission in order to advise and determine the most appropriate response by the church to the challenge of the urban priority areas in Britain's inner cities. The Commission was made up of experts, the majority of whom were laypeople. The Commission was established in order to examine how best the church could minister in the changing environment of Britain's inner cities. In 1981 there were widespread riots in many of Britain's cities. The riots were sparked by the growing impoverishment of the inner cities, unemployment and the decay that could be experienced. With it were social problems that meant that more and more people and families who could abandoned the city and emigrated to the suburbs. The poor and indigent, the elderly and lonely, migrants who had nowhere else to go, remained in the inner city. Commercial life thus became challenging, crime was on the increase, unemployment was growing, and poverty rife. At the forefront of the riots in 1981 was policing, as the Dear Commission declared. However, policing was just a symptom of a more grim reality, the pervasive sense of alienation and impoverishment and isolation of communities whom circumstance drew to the poverty of the inner city slum dwellings. Many of the social apartments and housing estates had become abandoned, and those who remained lived in fear, were elderly or too poor to move. Invariably, there was a school in the locality, and even that was experiencing dwindling enrolment figures, teachers were bused into the area because they too lived outside the community. The only remaining social institution invariably present was the parish church. The Vicar lived in the community, but all other social actors in social services etc lived outside the community.

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The riots in 1981 came about as a response to the social breakdown and alienation felt in many of these communities. People were living precarious lives, many in isolation, especially the elderly, and community life was badly affected by the diminishing social services and welfare due to the reduction of funding of social projects by the then new Margaret Thatcher Government. "Faith in the City" was published after commissioners and researchers had sought wide-ranging opinions across society. The research undertaken was extensive, and opinions were sought across all sectors of the population. The report itself once published gave rise to much debate about the sociology and the theology of the city. It also led to debates about racism and racial justice in society, and it affected the way in which the Church was resourcing inner city parishes. Beyond what was obvious about the findings of the Commission, was the realisation that what the British people prided themselves about was no more. That is, the idea of a caring society. A fund was established, for example, to promote initiatives by the churches in the inner city. Faith in the City, it must be stressed was addressed to the whole church in the entirety of British society.

I tell this story in part because it gives explanation for my choice of topic. Besides, it is prompting me to open up a debate about the city and the church that is otherwise neglected in our country. Indeed, in South Africa one can detect much of what one observed in Britain in the 1980s. The demographics of our cities are changing. They are changing not least because the able and more affluent are moving out of the cities, especially white people and those black people who can soon do so as well. As in Britain, the flats that had been established during the 1960s to cater for the civil servants and young families have been abandoned, and many inner city buildings have been allowed to decay. Except in few instances, commercial life has become reduced to liquor stores, hair dressing salons, cash loan shops, and shopfronts are closed or boarded up and many people are afraid to venture out at most times. Many of those who are to be found loitering or lingering are themselves homeless, unemployed, desperate, hungry and have no sense of belonging. Everything that they see is alienation, or a sense of detachment – angry, resentful, desperate. I have

also noticed that even here many of the commercial establishments one usually finds in our high streets have moved to the shopping malls like Menlyn, or to Sandton or the new shopping conurbation in Johannesburg called Waterfall Estates. In South Africa this abandonment is more dramatic because city life is no more, and people live in the suburbs behind high security fences, or in secure areas where none can venture. I can foresee that in a place like Pretoria the inner city CBD is destined to become like a ghost town as more and more government offices move out onto the periphery of the city, and businesses follow suit. As much as elsewhere the inner city becomes dilapidated, decay sets in and the city is abandoned. Right now the central business area of Pretoria is dirty, with rubbish piling up, littered all over. Not surprisingly, therefore, city dwellers feel foreign to the place, they know nobody, or are suspicious, but some are content to be unknown, having left their home villages to seek a new life in the city. Thus it is that crime is rife, and yet police are considered to be “the enemy”, but there is breakdown in law and order, and innocent, law-abiding citizens are affected.

The City of Tshwane has a rapidly growing urban population. The city becomes home to diverse peoples, cultures and languages, and nationalities. It has become a convergence point for those who have influxed from elsewhere in the country in search of a better life. It is also a place where refugees and asylum-seekers seek shelter, where the homeless gather attracted not just by city lights but by the imperative of survival. The city population is estimated at about 3million residents, and it is said to grow at about 4.1% annually. City and municipal services are not coping with the demand especially from unregistered and non-formal settlements. The result is that unemployment in the city is at 20%, and within that youth unemployment is officially stated as 32,6%. With such rapid urbanisation housing and services are in short supply; and 24,3% of the population is said to be living in poverty, and more than 1% of the population lives on less than US\$2 per day. The 2011 Census, for example, shows that 15% of the city households have no source of income. And yet it must be granted that these figures, bad as they are, make Tshwane a more desirable place to live in than many cities including Johannesburg.

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It is noticeable that a city like Pretoria is a young city. It is home to four of this nation's largest universities, and it is also populated by many prestige private schools, and hospitals. Pretoria is as much the administrative capital of our country and as such it draws many people, many of them professionals, who are strange to the city from all corners of our country. It is also, for that reason, a city of opportunity, entrepreneurship and adventure.

I am glad to say though that in such a situation the church is present. The church remains in the city for many as a form of spiritual presence. It witnesses to values and confidence about the city and about the people of God. The church remains a place of gathering, a meeting place of cultures that gives confidence and hope even as the grim reality that surrounds so many people may dictate otherwise. If the church in the city is to be a witness to faith it needs to feel the pulse of the community that surrounds it and to be part of the life of that community. That life could be that of caring for those who fall victim to the cruelties of city life and for which they had been least prepared, and to others a place where love and nurture could be experienced. The church has to be a visible witness to a faith that is not seen, but one which causes others to have hope and confidence. By its presence the church is not just part of the community just as it is, but that it also represents something that the community can become. It gives hope of a transcendental being that shapes a better future. The church is a critical presence to civic life. If the church is to be church, however, it must also be bold about what it believes as a place for worship, and prayer and moments of silence as the city bustles around it. The church is a representation of the stillness that is of God, and that is reassuring about the presence of God.

I believe that the church in the city is a symbol of inclusion and of belonging. That is so because for many people belonging and seeking to belong is a fundamental aspiration of life. That is so because much that surrounds us tends to exclude or put burdens and preconditions. The church should be one place where we can belong together just as we are. Many who walk the streets of the city, or live in isolation in the apartments that surround us, or seek work or live and work in illegal trading in

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fear, trapped in criminal cultures are all yearning to belong, to be loved, to be cared for and to be recognised. To belong is to be human.

In a recent lecture the Dean of Harvard Divinity School, David Hempton, sets out five criteria for belonging in a Christian community. First, by belonging we are not just affiliated. We exist in community for a compelling moral reason, not just for social comfort, or privilege. Second, belonging means that you are accepted just as you are and you accept others in return just as they are. By so doing you commit to each other to grow together into the stature of becoming more human. It is the recognition of our weaknesses and frailties that makes us most comfortable in an environment. But Self-acceptance is key. Belonging brings with a commitment to the welfare and well being of the other. It asserts that your own humanity is tied up with that of another. Belonging is an assertion of our humanity. Further, by belonging we commit you to the other as well – no one ever belongs in isolation. It is to accept that life can never be lived in isolation, and none of us are self-sufficient unto ourselves. We need each other to flourish in life. Belonging, therefore, in David N Hempton's understanding is ethical and transformative. It roots one in an existential life and it gives one the possibility of a transcendent view of the world. In other words just as the world around us is organic and subject to change, so also human nature is a product of never ending change. Belonging, therefore, to be real and meaningful, must hold the duty and possibility of being transformation.

It may interest some of you somewhat as to where this discussion is taking us. It seeks to depict two aspects of the church and society. First, it seeks to root what we are and what we believe in the understanding of the human condition. It says that as human beings we are touched to the core of our beings by the life of the other. That is so because we recognise the mark of God in every human being. It does not say that success and well being and wealth are we have should make us feel guilty. It only serves to point out that whatever our wealth or well being may be, God has tied us by a common cord of belonging to those who have nothing and are poor or suffering. This is what Jurgen Moltmann says in a recently published book, *The Living God And the Faithfulness of Life (2016)*

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We do not live a merely earthly life, and not only a human life, but simultaneously (we) also live the life that is divine, eternal, and infinite. Eternal life is not endless life but life that is filled with God, life in abundance (2016:74).

He goes on to say that actually human life is a gift of God and belongs to all by faith, and that faith, in his words, “is joy in the divine fullness of life.”

In an essay with the title, “Faith Communities in a Civil Society” Rowan Williams (2012:303-309), then Archbishop of Canterbury, seeks to respond to Christian perceptions about the extent to which religion is alienating and especially in Islamist fundamentalism, causes and is enforced by violence and terrorism, points out that for a Christian believer the kingdom of God is a worthy aspiration. A Christian exists so as to bring to realisation the kingdom of God. He then goes on to explain that the kingdom of God is no mere political aspiration or an imposition by power or might, or by colonialism or imperialism, or by fear or by threats of retribution. It is not a geographical expression that can be visited (as if one is a tourist!), or materialised. It is, for him “the condition of human relationships... where the purpose of God is determinative for men and women and so becomes visible in history”(2012:305). Somehow the community of Jesus could be viewed as a foretaste of that kingdom to the extent that it represented the flourishing of human relationships and the embodiment of God values. For that reason, he goes on to say, the church is a “trustee of a vision that is radical and universal, the vision of social order that is without fear, oppression, the violence of exclusion...” (2012:305). A fulfilled and flourishing life is life lived without fear, but in hope and love. God’s promises are not guarantees or warranties. God’s promises are more about life lived in the fullness of joy. That joy is and can only be derived from full participation in that which Christ promises.

The presence of the church in society as a witnessing community of faith means that one can look up to the church in times of healing. That is so because of what the church stands for, truth and justice. The church is not an interest group like all others

in civil society. Rather the church symbolises a caring community and the love of Christ. It represents the common good. It exists as a disinterested party but valued to the extent that the results of the common life of citizens are realised, and that they advance the kingdom of God. The church should never seek dominance or hegemony over others, but that it becomes part of a partnership for good in society.

One of Livingstone Ngewu's favourite theologians as a Church Historian was arguably St Augustine of Hippo. He was one of the most influential Church Fathers of his time. In 426AD he published his influential treatise *de civitate dei contra paganos* (popularly referred to as *The City of God*). Augustine sought to defend the church against accusations that the reason that Rome was attacked and destroyed by the Visigoths in 410AD was because the Romans had abandoned the gods of their ancestors, and followed Christianity. The nation was in a state of deep shock, and despair. What Augustine sought to demonstrate was that what had been destroyed was not the city of God but one that was draped in pagan trappings or garments. Augustine believed that ultimately the city of God would triumph, or would be spared the indignity of being overcome by pagan gods. Interestingly enough he placed among the conditions for a city under God was one where there was justice. His memorable aphorism, "what are kingdoms without justice? They're just gangs of bandits" declares that human power exercised in fear of God will be applied in humility. In his words

For I am aware what ability is requisite to persuade the proud how great is the virtue of humility, which raises us, not by a quite human arrogance, but by a grace above all earthly dignities that totter on this shifting scene.

Of course, as we all know, not only was the church re-established and triumphed in Rome, but that the church in Augustine's native North Africa was eventually wiped out, first by reason of the 100-year Donatists schism, but later and finally, by the Islamist invasion and displacement of the church. I am raising this not least to indicate that, as Augustine said, the church itself can come under the judgment of God, or to put it differently, the church is called upon to constantly examine its faith

recognise, as Paul said, that we have this faith in earthen jars, and that we must seek to abide by the will of God in humility and in the recognition that we do not have all the ultimate answers save by being guided by the gospel and seeking after the good news. The prophetic tradition speaks truth to the church just as much as it does to an unbelieving world. In prophecy, therefore, one may both occupy the place of faith in the tradition, but at the same time question that which goes by the name of faith. Prophecy is testing the social reality and condition against the avowed word of God. Rowan Williams says that the church does that best by its rootedness in the faith of the church and in its worship and spiritual life, but also by demonstrating a keen sense of belonging. When we belong we become not just strong but at times vulnerable.

The question that we must then ask ourselves as the viceroys of Christ in this city is whether we have confidence and love for the city enough to make of it a place of belonging? What partnerships are possible to advance the common good in the city: with the churches, with the City authorities, and with civil society? Can we examine how we are making Christ manifest in our city? In what ways does this church denote the Presence of God that speaks to the heart of God's people? I believe that Dean Ngewu's tenure as Dean of St Alban's was constantly seeking by prayer and worship, constantly seeking to find answers to these questions. More pertinently, should not the Anglican Church consider our own Faith in the City process whereby we can truly examine what God is saying to us in the city today and such that we can become more prophetic in proclaiming the gospel.

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#### REFERENCES

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