

Mapping the City Centre

Two years ago when I provided a report of the 2005 Methodist City Centre Network Conference for the web site, I managed to summarise each of the presentations and, I hope, communicate something of their messages and related discussion. At this year's conference, despite several pages of notes, I have found it much more difficult to sum up the message. Rather I seem to be on the receiving end of a variety of messages, messages not always in tune with each other nor adding up to a coherent whole. But maybe that's what I should expect in these post-modern times.

The structure of the conference was a bit like a sandwich. On Monday evening and Wednesday morning we had the bread of sessions concerned with Network or Methodist issues. On Tuesday we had the meat – tough meat – of four sessions led by the Reverend Chris Baker, Director of the William Temple Foundation in Manchester. The umbrella title of his sessions was *Mapping the City Centre* and each of the sessions had its own subtitle. It is necessary to have titles, but knowing a title of a session doesn't necessarily mean that you can anticipate the content or what you will learn from it. The title of the conference itself – *Stones, Bones and Mobile Phones* – seemed to have been chosen more for its poetry than illumination.

I will leave the domestic bread of the conference to be summarised elsewhere. Here I would like to try to help those of you who missed the conference (and maybe some of you who were there) to appreciate something of what went on during the full middle day. I will not always adhere to order in which things were mentioned or discussed.

Chris Baker is a theologian, and I am not. Like all experts, theologians have their jargon – words and phrases which are brief, but carry a lot. In familiar fields our jargon is useful and parsimonious; in unfamiliar fields it is opaque and can be a hindrance to understanding. There is also the phenomenon of jargon being used almost parrot-like while recognising that the full meaning of the words being used is not yet within reach. This meeting of expert use and exploratory use can lead to miscommunication or misinterpretation. There was a fair amount of jargon in the air during Tuesday. If, in what follows, I misinterpret or misuse a technical term, then I will, I trust, be corrected.

The day began, for me, more coherently than it ended. I have lived in Leeds for almost 46 years and in that time I have seen it change from a dirty industrial city to an affluent, bright, centre of finance, shopping and entertainment. Its current (copyrighted) motto is: *Leeds, live it, love it*. This is very different from the words under its coat of arms: *Pro rege et lege*. In different ways all cities and large towns have changed during the last few decades and these changes are most obvious in the physical changes in buildings and spaces. Chris asked to consider how the changes in urban space had affected the retail, cultural, and financial areas and those 'limbo areas' such as the city centre and the night scene. He distinguished between 'urban' and 'city' describing the latter as 'scripted' and the former 'unscripted'.

Whereas the unscripted urban is local, unglamorous, the place where excluded citizens are found, and where life is a day-to-day struggle. The scripted city is confidently structured. Everything is designed to fit together, it presents a 'branded' image – *Leeds, live it, love it* – and it follows the script of transition from an industrial city based on labour and capital to a post-industrial city based on ideas. It is reborn as an 'ideopolis'.

An ideopolis is a city of ideas, where knowledge, creativity, enterprise, connectivity and the quality of life combine to create a dynamic local economy. In effect, ideopolis are cities where those who can choose where to work and live, choose to work and live.
[<http://www.ideopolis.info/ideopolis.htm>]

Manchester was the first city in the world predicated on industry. During the twentieth century it declined with increasing unemployment and decreasing health. In 1987 the city that had been 'cottonopolis' changed and became an ideopolis. This change, according to Chris, was marked by

the third election of a Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher. Municipal socialism was abandoned for 'flagship development' which eventually led to the hosting of the Commonwealth Games. Manchester became a 24/7, funky, hip place for high earners.

Another pair of contrasting terms used by Chris were the 'Fordist' society and the 'post-Fordist' society – the 'Ford' being Henry Ford of car-manufacturing fame.

The characteristics of a Fordist society or city include mass production and limited choice. Henry Ford said: 'People can have the Model T in any colour – so long as it's black'. The requirements of such industries meant that the workers in a factory were either all at work or all on holiday: 'factory fortnight' each year was the annual break when all employees took their holidays at the same time (and often in the same place). Concomitant with this change in working conditions came the rise of the welfare state; strong, organised labour; and state control of the flows of capital, investments and so on.

The characteristics of a post-Fordist society, economy and city include: flexible clusters of industries with outsourcing and a contract culture. Consumer choice becomes paramount and niche markets appear. Among the consequences are less secure employment, a movement from a welfare city to an entrepreneurial city, with people engaging in a wider variety of experiences and possessing multiple identities as they move from one context to another; and the growth of a cultural economy – an economy in which the relationship with cultural values affect economic decisions.

One of the markers, in this country, of the transition from a Fordist society to a post-Fordist one, is the 'Winter of Discontent' (1978/9) when the trades unions organised strikes as a protest against the Labour government's ceiling on pay rises, and hence made way for the Margaret Thatcher's victory in the succeeding autumn.

Another obvious change, in big cities at least, is the rise – physically in most cases – of city-centre residential accommodation. Blocks of increasing height have appeared in areas which, although in easy reach of the city centre, are in areas which some time ago were residential but have seen an industrial period now ended. There seems to be more flats – apartments – for sale or rent than the demand for such accommodation can justify. Who lives behind the secure entrances of these places? A report based on responses from both residents and estate agents in Manchester a few years ago suggests there are four groups of city-centre dwellers:

- ◆ *Young professionals doing 'the city thing'*
Renting in the centre is convenient for work and they can experience the buzz of city-centre life, its culture, sociability and hedonism. They have few ties, not (yet) following a life-course involving a job or career, marriage and children. Theirs is an extended young adulthood, deferring conventionality and they move on after a stay of between 12 and 36 months.
- ◆ *Successful agers*
Old age is now a productive well-remunerated phase with the equity available from an accumulation of capital in housing. These people are active consumers of culture – theatre, galleries, concerts, films.
- ◆ *Counter-culturists*
They have alternative political views, working in niche or high-earning creative industries such as 'design'. This group includes gays and lesbians leading to an ethos of tolerance and diversity, an acceptance of non-conventional lifestyles, and the exhibiting of solidarity
- ◆ *Lifestyle changers*
They are not in (or not now in) a (potentially) long-term relationship. They exercise their individuality rather than adhering to convention. Their commitment may be questioned and

they may be viewed as 'flaky'. They may have had a bad or negative experience that has resulted in some sense of counter-culturism or they may be counter-culturists by choice.

Most of these people are under 40, many much younger, working professionally and living alone.

This analysis is partial. It makes no reference to ethnicity, though there is (on the surface) no reason to assume that it is not about people of all ethnicities. It also ignores those for who belong to the city centre who make up the street culture and who are there to beg, or who are homeless and who may sleep rough. Is it that these other aspects are not written into the script? Could it be that following the script means ridding the city centre of this unscripted element?

In addition to these large-scale scripted changes, the provision of accommodation and the branding of the city, there are many smaller scale (deliberate or consequent) changes that we may notice. Buildings have changed their purposes, churches have become pubs, banks have become winebars, the co-op has become a casino. There is activity in the city seven days a week and almost 24 hours a day. The changes in the Sunday trading laws have made Sunday the second most popular day for shopping and shopping itself has become a sort of entertainment, often family entertainment, wandering around the arcades and malls in search of something. There is a buzz and there is energy. This is probably most obvious in the night-life of pubs and clubs which is marketed not just for Fridays and Saturdays but every night of the week with special branding of evenings to attract particular groups, sucking in the under thirties from the suburbs and beyond. The choices available for entertainment have increased provided that you have money, and, in the eyes of some, the city has become 'city lite' and entertainment hub, almost a theme park whose services only the moneyed can afford. Branding pervades the city, homogenising and sanitising. Logos, names and initials sum up and offer life-style experiences that cannot be explained, or debated, or justified only presented and sold. There is even a sort of branding of people. Groups of young people set out for the city and town centres in a fancy-dress uniform that identifies who belongs and who doesn't. There is a loss of identity, a submission to the will of the group that may lead to behaviour that the group revels in but which an individual might reject. Is this different from the gang culture that pervades the less affluent areas of our towns and cities? And tomorrow it will be different. The speed of change, the turnover of products, means that what has been purchased today – whether product or experience – will be unsatisfactory the day after and will have to be replaced. Without space or time for the poor, the city is revanchist, it is taking revenge on those who are poor, who cannot consume and therefore are unproductive.

Where is the resistance to all this? Are there alternatives? And if there are do we – the church – want to be part of the resistance, be aligned with the alternatives? From the discussion prompted by these sorts of questions it became apparent that much of what the church is doing or identifies with in the city centre does subvert the money-spending, pleasure-seeking, exploitation of the city. The examples that were mentioned seemed low key:

- ◆ 'philosophy in pubs' – an atheistic yet spiritual discussion group
- ◆ coffee bars and cafés – counter-cultural hospitality
- ◆ day centre for homeless – immigrants and asylum seekers
- ◆ the provision of space

But this is the nature of subversion and sometimes the subversion leads to wider acceptance. Fair-trade was once the exclusive concern of the churches, now it has been adopted by the large retailers

As the morning came to a close we spoke of the use of public spaces, we noted that the market – so obvious in our towns and cities – is moving into the voluntary sector. We had not said much about the sex industry, or is it just part of the accepted entertainment scene? There is a rejection of the mainstream, an emphasis on individual choice, politics is mistrusted and people prefer to concentrate on single issues. We acknowledged a cynical attitude towards authority and a deliberate exercising of the right not to join. There is a resistance to the domination of large companies – the

creation of towns that could be labelled 'Tescopolis'. Resistance is often expressed through the Internet which offers almost everyone a space to air their views, to state their position, but who is reading, who is listening?

The tension between wanting to be an individual and choosing not to join, and the need to be part of an identifiable group or a member of a gang is not only there in the young it affects us all. What is marketing but the offer of belonging, to belong to those who can afford to carry a Prada handbag, or drive a BMW. Why do clothes exhibit logos much in the same way as school uniforms display badges? Yet it is important to have the right badge in the right place and so we present different identities in different contexts, changing our appearance or our behaviour to suit the circumstances. Perhaps in the open conversations of the 'philosophy in pubs' group or at the table in our coffee bars, and in the postings on My Space or YouTube, there lurks a search for some secure, personal ground which unites these different identities. Perhaps this is the search for spirituality that we often hear about. The church through all its activities offers (or should be offering) spiritual 'goods and services' that are free to all, that can help give coherence to our post-modern fragmented lives.

In the afternoon the proceedings were much more open. We moved quickly in and out of small groups turning our chairs towards each other and then opening them out to re-form the large semi-circle so that Chris could hear our thinking as someone from each group was asked to summarise our discussion. This often expanded to include comments from around the room. Chris kept writing on the flip chart as the ideas and illustrations were offered and noted and commented on. I cannot attempt to report the discussion, I can only try to weave the threads together into some sort of pattern.

We believe that everyone has value and our churches welcome all. This had been mentioned towards the end of the morning and came out again in this first session of the afternoon. The pluralism of the city – a threat to the establishment – has long been accepted by the church. We often find within our church communities – within our space – people sitting next to each other who would meet in no other circumstances. This acceptance of diversity is a message that challenges, it goes against the branded belonging and may lead to tension with those we go into partnership with who may be focused on a particular group or need. We do not divide the world into those who are our customers and those who are not, serving those who we see as our special client-base. John Wesley saw the whole world as his parish. The 21st century church has the whole world as its client-base, as its core business, or at least that part of the whole world that it encounters. Our worship and our prayer is for the city, not just for the church, presenting the common sense of Gospel values. We attend to people and to the city, actively listening, listening to the silent, noticing who is not speaking, what is not being said. We can be prophetic, seeing things that other people cannot see. Our voice is authentic, but we are just one among the authentic voices of many players in a competitive market place, each striving to provide the 'best' whatever that might currently be.

We have space in our buildings that can be used in different (non-commercial) ways so within the framework of the church (centred on a particular building) there are often several communities. In addition to those who worship on Sunday, there are those who meet during the week, not necessarily to worship in a traditional manner, but to come together for a common purpose. We are encouraged to see such gatherings as 'fresh expressions of church'. A breakfast club providing food and attention can be sacramental. Each church building, or focus, has several such communities and they may rarely touch or never overlap. We build these communities by offering a spiritual dimension amid the civic and the commercial powerhouse, offering space – quiet, contemplative, sacred space, space for the preaching of the Kingdom, space to be still and reflect.

Our church buildings are in particular places. It is not often practical to change location, and it is not easy to evaluate the advantages of moving or staying. Many of our buildings are old and are historically special, or are seen as special perhaps because they house the remains of a saint, a place to come to, a place with memories. Abraham moved from place to place, pitching his tent, staying a while, and then moving on. Behind him he left an altar marking the place, a special place. Where

are these temporary special places today? How often do we see a few bunches of flowers tied to a lamppost, marking a death, a loss? These markers are important, yet in the story of the Transfiguration, Jesus prevents the disciples from doing something similar. There is a tension about place, between the maintained place, and the serendipitous location. It is tempting to stay in our maintained places, safe and secure rather than being out in the public places following a risky and possible offensive theology.

Should we be thinking of space and place in a different way? For the Jews the city was the place of the Temple. This was the sacred place. Jesus said the where two or three were gathered together in his name then he would be there – the gathering of people creates the sacred place, the sacred space, subverting the role of the Temple. Rather than the location or the building as being the place or the space can we see people as making the place, as making space? If so then this makes us the place of encounter, the location where others can encounter Jesus. This is illustrated in the encounter on the road to Emmaus during which the encounter between two people provides the opportunity for an encounter with Christ, almost saying that in our meeting with people we can provide the space for Jesus to enter in – immanent rather than transcendent. Sometime we *are* the answer. By being ourselves we meet a need – ‘the surprise of the saints’ – ‘When did I ...?’

Should we be making time and space? Time and space for us to be ourselves, for others to be themselves. Time for humans to be human, to heal, to hope. This space can offer the sanctuary of withdrawal, or, as in chaplaincy, the space may be out there held in a person where there can be encounter or where sanctuary is offered. The safety and security of sanctuary may be in conflict with the intention to be inclusive. Because we would like to be ‘nice’ (or seen as ‘nice’) and inoffensive – unlike Jesus who was offensive – often fudge the problem of who is included and who excluded, counted and not counted. And in deciding who is in an who is not we may threaten those who wish to be anonymous, who find sanctuary in a place where no one asks questions, in what someone called a ‘Pentecost community’ for the lost. Sanctuary can erect boundaries and the city has too many boundaries already.

In the final session of the day we were reminded of (or introduced to) the notions of 'solid' and 'liquid' church and Chris began by asking us to read a statement taken from the web site of *Sanctus 1* which is based in Manchester (see panel) and, in our groups, to pick out what we saw as the key phrases.

We characterised *Sanctus 1* as an emerging church for young, educated people who were questioning the essence of the Gospel, fluid and open to anyone who wished to participate. It is 'exploratory', 'journeying', 'experiential', 'holistic' and Christian, though what this means in practice escapes me. Its theology is 'incarnational' – a bit of jargon that was used quite frequently and which I think means that God acts through people and only through people – and non-credal. We wondered about the ability of *Sanctus 1* and similar groups to sustain their innovation, and would the membership always be young, with people moving on after a time and others joining. Or would they all grow older together. We expected that *Sanctus 1* would be technological. This could be an example of a liquid church.

The notions of solid and liquid church are underpinned by the notions of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gessellschaft* (association) and the characteristics of these two pairs of contrasting ideas were summarised on a sheet that I have reproduced (slightly reformatted) on the next page. The discussion must have been interesting because I have few notes, and what was recorded on the flip charts did is so brief as to add little to what was on the sheet that was handed out. We recognised what was meant by liquid and solid church we also viewed them as caricatures and that what we preferred was something that was (as one participant termed it) 'slushy' church, or as Chris preferred a 'hybrid' church.

At the end of the day, as I indicated at the beginning of this report, I felt less sure of what was being said, less sure of how the ideas and the observations fitted together. Through the day there had been glimpses of different experiences, different standpoints, different expectations, different hopes, and had been presented with broad descriptions of the needs, the challenges, the opportunities that are there in the centre of our towns and cities. However, there are no clear responses to be picked of the shelf and applied with ease. Instead, I have feeling that each city centre or town centre church finds itself amidst a maelstrom of movement and change. There is no time for analysis and study in a deliberate search for pointers as to what might be done to make a change for the better. Instead we just *there*, making our presence felt, or being subversive, just being.

Ken Tait, 26th March 2007

Please e-mail me your comments, particularly if you feel I have missed the point or distorted what was said or presented.

Sanctus 1 is an emerging church in the city centre of Manchester; engaged in a journey of creative exploration into faith, worship and culture.

We are committed to the city centre community of Manchester, the dynamic nature of the city centre reflects the people that we are. We are a fluid community that moves between a variety of city centre locations.

We are an inclusive Christian community and believe that God is not defined by theology. We welcome dialogue between different theological positions but also recognise that dialogue involves listening and real listening involves change.

We believe that God is already in the world and working in the world. We recognise God's indefinable presence in music, film, arts and other key areas of contemporary culture. We wish to affirm and enjoy the parts of our culture that give a voice to one of the many voices of God and challenge any areas that deafen the call of God and hence constrain human freedom.

Experience is vital and experience defines us. We aim to provide an environment in which people can experience the other. In which the vastness of God can be wondered at whilst reflecting on the paradox of the human who was God, Jesus.

We aim for our worship to be holistic and to allow the freedom to explore new ways in which to wonder at God. We will draw from the vast resource of the Christian spiritual journey. *Sanctus1* is an ancient-future church, drawing from the past to resource the present and into the future.

We are a dynamic group exploring the journey together; we are not the finished article but are sincere in our search. Our journey is one of exploration but fortunately it is a journey in which we have a guide that lights our path and walks beside us in times of blessing and of trouble.

Gemeinschaft (community)

- work together for the common good
- united by ties of family (kinship) and neighbourhood
- land worked communally by inhabitants
- social life characterised by intimate, private and exclusive living together
- members bound by common language and traditions which recognised common goods and evils and common friends and enemies
- three types of *gemeinschaft* relationships: Kinship, Friendship and Neighbourhood or locality.

Gesellschaft (association – we choose) the organisational principle of the city, where life is seen as:

- a mechanical (as opposed to organic) identity characterised by disunity, individualism, selfishness and competition
- stress on the individual and the power of the rational will
- each person understood in terms of a particular role and service provided
- an artificial rather than a natural environment
- complex structures of belonging rather than simple ones (i.e. we ‘belong’ in many different ways – question – can we think of any?)

Peter Ward’s ideas about liquid and solid church.

Some characteristics of Solid Church

- Attendance at church equals faithfulness – emphasises one central meeting gathering in one place to do the same thing (raises issues of surveillance and control)
- Size counts – building bigger churches to hold more people and process more activities.
- One size fits all – people meet in the same room and do the same thing together
- Join the club – long term service gives a degree of authority – helps create hierarchies – constant calls on people’s time to get involved – activity in the organisation equals discipleship – absorbs energy inwards, not sends it spinning outwards

Conclusion: solid church is hierarchical, bureaucratic, inward-looking – its meaning exists for those who already belong- solid churches are institutions of Heritage, Refuge and Nostalgia

Some characteristics of Liquid Church.

- Expresses itself in movements and flows
- Works along networks and nodes – nodes are individuals or events (e.g. Greenbelt, New Wine)
- Central importance of relationships – networked, informal contact between individuals and groups (*gesellschaft*) will replace monolithic meetings and formalised friendship
- Commodification of religious product helps flow and appeals to the Christian as consumer – tapes, CDs, fashion, manifestos
- Communication cannot be controlled by leaders – networks tend to evolve through organic growth
- Liquid church will have fuzzy edge – no strong idea of outsiders and insiders.
- Communication rather than gathering.

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