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Opening the Future of the City: Masterplanning, Culture and a Cause for Celebration in the East End of Newcastle.

Two routes to a regenerated urban context have dominated in Newcastle-Gateshead during the first five years of the new millennium. One is the route through masterplanning and the other is the route through culture. I offer here a reflection both on the events that signify most clearly the underlying issues that these two routes to regeneration contain and an attempt to outline praxis oriented examples that might illuminate a local church's role within such a context.

Regeneration through Masterplanning

In February 2000 a Green Paper was published entitled *Going for Growth*, which sought to address this sense of crisis for a city otherwise trapped by its social and economic history and its self-perception as a regional capital in the most deprived region in England.¹ A vision was set out for a *competitive, cohesive, cosmopolitan* regional capital, 'a global meeting place where new ideas are generated and exchanged'. There was no disputing the boldness of the masterplanners' vision. Indeed in the national broadsheets the leader columns were soon drawing attention to Newcastle, commending the vision and ability of the city to 'reinvent itself'.

In June 2000 *Going for Growth* itself was launched amidst protests. The need to pursue regeneration through large scale demolition was controversial not because of the idea of regeneration itself but, as was reported in the aftermath of the launch, consultation was not enough, 'they are demanding to be involved in the decisions.'² This was not just the view of journalists but it was also the view of researchers who concluded that 'the strategy has not involved local people at the vital stage of regeneration and has been unable to provide communities with a sense of ownership of the process and proposals'.³

It is often pointed out that regeneration in itself was not the obstacle since Newcastle has not only been through periods of change and improvement in the past but also there is a certain civic pride associated with the efforts to rebuild communities during the time of shipyard and factory closures from the 1980s onwards.

The tensions around *Going for Growth* have led to the label being abandoned but masterplanning continues. There are now, however, signs that the principle articulated in central government policy, that local communities must be in the 'driving seat' of change right from the start is being given greater prominence by the civic leaders of regeneration.⁴

Regeneration through Culture

A year after the Green Paper culture took centre stage. In September 2001 the Gateshead Millennium Bridge (the 'Winking Eye') was opened by the Queen. Visitors to the Newcastle Quayside will today see the name of Gateshead writ large across the transparent control room - testimony to the bold vision for the North East that has emerged from south of the River Tyne. This was the precursor to the Baltic Centre for

Contemporary Art housed in a converted flour mill. In the autumn of 2004 The Sage Music Centre, designed by the architect Norman Foster, was opened.

Underlying the new built environment was the hope that becoming European Capital of Culture in 2008 would provide not only icing on the cake but also the economic stimulus for more development, certainly employment and possibly even a renewed emphasis on enterprise. The failure of the bid⁵ in June 2003 meant that after a strategic pause *Culture*¹⁰ (Culture to the power of 10) was launched, setting an agenda for the decade to come and committing Newcastle-Gateshead, among other things, to host 10 key global events during that period.

Inclusion has been a theme running throughout the cultural renewal: there is free admission to the Baltic, the outreach programme at the Sage is designed to touch many different communities including minority ethnic ones and the recent Tall Ships Race involved many local people in both the events on the Quayside and even in crewing the ships across the North Sea. The policy document that set out the cultural strategy for Newcastle-Gateshead reflected this desire for inclusivity, adopting a 'simple but inclusive definition of culture—as the expression of human values and identity'.⁶

The question locally is whether this commitment to cultural inclusivity can break through culture as 'a marketing or branding tool'⁷ and make a significant contribution to the identity and renewal of the city.

Involvement through Governance?

Regeneration through masterplanning and culture relies for its effectiveness on involvement of local communities. A suspicion continues that this is still superficial and tokenistic in terms of its longer term goals of empowerment through involvement leading to sustainable social and economic outcomes in Tyneside communities. One way of testing this out is to go below the surface and investigate at a structural and individual level how far-reaching involvement in these two streams of regeneration has become.

From the late 1990s a team of researchers from Newcastle University have been researching the life and governance of Walker, one of the wards in the outer east end of the city of Newcastle. At the time of the research Walker was statistically the 30th most multiply deprived ward in England⁸ and during the introduction of *Going for Growth* the threats of demolition led directly to an increase in active residents groups and community networks. The research investigated through structured interviews with residents, 'spider people', community workers, politicians and other stakeholders whether local governance could be improved to assist the overcoming of social exclusion and a movement towards a more ethnically mixed community.

The conclusions that the authors, Ali Madanipour and Tanya Merridew offered is a sobering one. 'It is difficult', they write,

for people to begin to play an active role in local governance processes or even to take them very seriously when daily life is about survival. However, what has also emerged is that even when people have relatively stable lifestyles, taking governance seriously is difficult when the quality of their homes and

living environment is poor, the funding priorities do not match their expectations and needs, and the authorities are seen to be themselves not in full control.⁹

This suggests a struggle to find ways of enabling genuine involvement in masterplanning since this relies on effective representation through community structures. It infers also that there is a mismatch between the emphasis on involvement in cultural activities on the Quayside and daily reality of involvement of people in shaping the future of their localities.

Social and Economic Change and the Local Church

How is the church called to relate to such a situation? An answer must incorporate an account of God's mission in his world. God is to be found in those places where new things are being brought into being, in those places where justice is being achieved, where equitable relationships are being developed and where communities are lively, interesting and wholesome places to be. To borrow the title of Paul Avis' recent book the church's ministry aims to be 'a ministry shaped by mission'¹⁰, that is shaped by *missio Dei*. The discernment of God's mission within the world at the level of the local church includes discernment of the life of the kingdom in all the processes of change as localities develop new patterns of community and geography. A local church community is part of civic society and together with other organisations it bears both some of the responsibility for the way things are locally and also some of the responsibility for the future. To put it simplistically the church will be there throughout the development of the local community – it is not a disinterested party.

Four brief reflections from the Church's involvement in the East End of Newcastle may be of assistance to enable reflections upon a church-based interdisciplinary praxis in a Core City context.

Structuring the Local Church's Engagement

In 1999 the local Anglican Church was faced with a disconnection between its congregational life and the work of the partnerships that were planning and implementing changes across the East End of the City. The institutional church was involved in the regeneration structures of the East End, yet the life of local worshipping communities was in decline. The symptoms of decline were easy to detect – deteriorating buildings, somewhat isolated socially and even physically from local communities, and reducing numbers attending worship. The passing of the industrial era meant a population flight, a housing stock that was less and less meeting the needs of the contemporary family and a low skills equilibrium as those who had served apprenticeships took their talents to other parts of the country, or even the continent. The church had managed to remain but like many communities in post-industrial, former working class areas was becoming drained of energy.

There was no instant fix for church communities, nor has there been since. What is emerging is a fresh way of working and of organising the Church of England parishes. In the early part of 2000 the local church communities, through the enabling of the deanery, released a proportion of stipendiary resource to lead a ministerial task that was labelled 'Community Engagement'. The task of community engagement was to coordinate the church's involvement in regeneration structures and in one of the early documents produced, the aim of the task was:

to create a setting where local people, Church and non-Church, can share what they have learnt about discovering God in the East End of Newcastle with each other and with people who come to learn; that those who come in and those who are already there learn from each other; that together, we can seek justice in the regeneration of our City, Church and country.

This task was to be carried out so that secular agencies, partnerships and community projects were able to have a point of reference for their own engagement with churches. It was conceived to be a leadership task and the concepts that Robin Greenwood elaborated in his *Transforming Priesthood* were an important stimulus.¹¹ The lead person was to 'focus' the church's corporate role and responsibility for taking part in the reshaping of the social and economic environment and at the same time 'distribute' the role amongst a team of colleagues lay and ordained. It was a vision for a team from the parishes allowing their ministries to be shaped by the mission of God as it was discerned within regeneration. Furthermore, the role was linked to a parish priest's position and was styled as a 'dual-role post' in recognition that in some ways what was being made visible was a piece of ordained ministry that many clergy in similar situations fulfil and that the fruits of much of the community engagement role flowed back into mundane parish life.

However, two things were new: first, that the role was linked to a geographical area defined by the centre of gravity of local regeneration networks, actually covering a population of about 40,000 and most of the geographical area of six parishes; second, the post was embedded in a collaborative way of working with colleagues in adjacent parishes who also carry particular ministerial tasks across a the wider area – church development, local ministry development and theological training and education.¹² For the deanery this was a radical step in developing an Anglican polity in a situation of rapid social and economic change. For the local churches it has given a means of working alongside local residents as fragile new representative structures come into being. For the local communities it has contributed another independent voice alongside theirs, a certain continuity in the light of a large turnover of secular regeneration staff and in the words of one participant a 'spirituality of partnership' that has brought a concern for 'the principles of justice and equity in all things that might otherwise easily be overlooked in the world of capital programmes, performance indicators and outputs'.¹³

The Local Church and Partnership

In the 1980s the local churches in the East End found a common cause with local people and communities as the Tyne and Wear Development Corporation laid out its plans for the Newcastle Quayside. The story is told elsewhere¹⁴ but what emerged was a commitment by the churches to the growth and flourishing of the community and voluntary sector in the East End of Newcastle.

There have been positive consequences emerging through this strategy for the church's involvement in regeneration through masterplanning and culture. First of all, the voluntary sector has come to occupy a prominent situation in local regeneration partnerships. The *Going for Growth* experience prompted the formation of the East End Community and Voluntary Sector Forum, a network of organisations designed to strengthen relationships but also to give the sector a voice in the masterplanning process. As new pieces of regeneration emerge the Voluntary Sector has a mechanism

to enable the sector to undertake responsibilities and there is another route into the decision making processes by local groups. As the infrastructure has grown so has the capacity for the voluntary sector's involvement. Voluntary sector representatives have been involved in the choice of developer for the latest programme for regeneration on the Riverside, and now there is a seat on the Riverside Partnership board. They are also involved, in the creation of new area structures for the Local Strategic Partnership, crucial for the delivery of the Neighbourhood Renewal Funding programme.

Secondly, the church has begun to be involved in the creation of local partnerships. A prominent example is was the setting up of the Ouseburn Trust¹⁵, a voluntary sector led partnership which has overseen the regeneration of the Ouseburn Valley (the original industrial area of Newcastle) since the late 1990s. More recently two of the local parishes have been involved in setting partnerships with local residents. One is in the process of re-developing a parish church site, strategically situated in relation to a masterplanning area, into a Children's Centre, a community place and a church. The other is working on cultural regeneration, this time developing a parish church building in a prominent situation overlooking the Quayside.

The parish churches' resources – buildings, land, long term commitment and people – have contributed to the enabling of local communities capacities to develop their own visions and begin the process of bringing them into reality. These local partnerships have involved residents groups, members of the churches, agencies, voluntary sector organisations and the local authority all playing to their strengths and recognising that the end result for each partner is greater than could have been achieved by working separately. The church as an institution is becoming realigned in terms of its power relationships: no longer is it dominant and desiring to be control, and it has taken the risk of being alongside others in the journey towards neighbourhood renewal, being part of the locality. There are questions of identity to work on, and for some the issue of distinctiveness, but these will not be answered through abstract theology only through the praxis of long term commitment.

Reconciliation through Language

The church's role of community engagement requires a new form of literacy. In September 2000 Churches Together met to consider the *Going for Growth* proposals. A member of the regeneration team gave a presentation and the meaning of 'consultation' was debated. It was clear that for the regeneration team consultation meant 'the giving of information and receiving feedback'. When pressed on the difference between 'consultation' and 'participation' the response was, 'Its all semantics, we mean the same thing!' The rhetoric of consultation had become self-referential in the sense that the information giver defined the meaning of the term.

The discussion broadened when the participants were asked to engage with some regeneration words – 'community', 'sustainability', 'potential', 'vibrancy' and 'regeneration' itself. The group that responded to the word regeneration when asked what they thought it meant responded with the words and phrases: 'suspicion', 'anger', 'fear', 'lack of knowledge', 'Poulson and T Dan Smith', 'break up of community' and 'lack of trust'. The group posed some key questions: regeneration 'from what?', 'to what or whom?', 'how?', 'by whom?' and 'who pays?' It was only

after the negative had been brought to the foreground that any idealistic and more positive notions were brought to the surface.

Patsy Healey from Newcastle University illuminates the rhetoric of regeneration through some remarks about the discourse embodied in *Going for Growth*. She describes it as a tool to reposition the city and to re-cast its discourses of transformation. Healey argues that:

this ‘game position’ was being played out to audiences external to the city, focused on capturing funding and investment attention, as with so much current regeneration policy. It was not talking to its own, the citizens of the city and especially its heartland supporters. Indeed, it spoke to the external audiences about the local processes of participation and partnership, which would accompany the development of the strategy.¹⁶

Healey also argued that there was a discrepancy between the national policy requirements for community involvement in masterplanning and the way that funding was organised ‘in ways which serve to reinforce unresponsive practises merely packaged in a rhetoric of responsiveness’.

The language of masterplanning can serve to dislocate the global and the local from each other and prevent a joining up of human experience which inevitably is touched by both dimensions. Rather than allow layers of discourse to interpenetrate each other the local becomes ‘protected’ from external influences in a way that is not only questionable from an ethical standpoint but also from the practicality of the possibility of doing so without fundamental contradiction.

The church’s prophetic role therefore begins with the discernment of false meanings, with resisting interpretations that do not lead to reconciliation and ‘re-filling’ language that has become almost empty of once positive content. Such an analysis is a vital tool for ministry that seeks to enable human flourishing in the midst of change.

Celebrating in Open Spaces

One of the more recent features of the East End of Newcastle has been the proliferation of festivals in places that have struggled to maintain their significance for the city. In July 2005 festival events were held on the Shields Road (once the most deprived shopping centres in the North East), in the Ouseburn Valley, on St Michael’s Mount (a strategic church site overlooking the Quayside and the Tyne Gorge) and in the Riverside Park (a failed attempt at creating an idyllic place of relaxation) – and that is not to include the Newcastle-Gateshead Quayside which just 20 years ago had a deeply uncertain future.

Each place has had claim to have been derelict in recent years – economically, physically or socially. A majority of them had become no-go areas and had become regional signs of inevitable decline, of fragmentation of the modern era and of hopelessness. In theological terms they might well be called ‘deserts’ or ‘wildernesses’.

These festivals are designed to be precursors of regeneration, celebrations of regeneration that has begun or community resistance to the dominance of ‘high

culture' on the Quayside. They typically involve local community groups providing a service or advertising their achievements. They involve regeneration funding bodies who wish to both attract new projects and tell the good news stories of existing partners. There will be activities for children and in the case of the Riverside Festival free trips on the river in locally owned boats. Community artists offer participation in countless types of creative activities. They are organised either by statutory agencies or by voluntary sector organisations working together or specially formed for the purpose.

The 'chord' of celebration that has been struck contains many notes: local life is eloquently expressed; there is renewed contact and ownership with spaces that were once important to the locality; there is a note of protest – against the misuse of places that should be valued and also implicitly against masterplanning itself; there is integration of those newly settled in the East End through the asylum seekers dispersal scheme; there is performance by cultural groups; there is a gentle assertion of some of the underlying justice issues such as health inequalities; the place of young people and children in a new future is emphasised.

There is resonance here with Leonie Sandercock's vision of *cosmopolis* in *Mongrel Cities* of 'the carnival of the multicultural city', characterised by 'playfulness'.¹⁷ Here the playfulness of the festival in the desert places mediates between the competing agendas forced to the surface of community life by masterplanning and culture as vehicles for renewal. When Jesus feeds the 5000 in the Galilean desert a miracle occurs as limited resources and scepticism about the future are transformed into overflowing abundance, a fulfilment of the kingdom, the meeting of human desires and the opening up of people's lives to new possibilities.¹⁸ This does not mean that all human desiring will be satisfied in regeneration but it does allow the church to see 'festival' as human anticipation of a future being prised into being and for the renewal of communities to be seen as pointing to the one who ultimately fulfils.

Conclusion

Readers from other Core Cities will recognise the context that has been described. What has been intended is not a prescriptive notion of ecclesial praxis in such situations, rather a partial description of where the parishes of the East End of Newcastle have reached in their exploration of God's call to ministry. What is suggested is that structuring the church for engagement with masterplanning and culture has been essential and that this, when it is aligned with an innovative way of partnership working at the very local level, a prophetic response to the prevailing policy rhetoric and a commitment to stimulating celebration in the community then small steps are taken to address the involvement deficit through affirmation and support where this is possible but also through resistance and counter-proposal where necessary. This is work in progress but the hope is that practitioners in other Core Cities will find resonances here that are fruitful.

Peter Robinson

Urban Ministry and Theology Project, Newcastle Diocese

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- ¹ Newcastle City Council. *Going for Growth: A Green Paper*. 2000
- ² 'Street Drama' in *Guardian*, Weds September 12, 2000
- ³ Sustainable Cities Research Institute, University of Northumbria. *Going for Growth: Research Brief for the Newcastle Community Alliance*. September 2000, p.3 (see their website <http://www.sustainable-cities.org.uk/work/publications.asp>)
- ⁴ DETR. *Our Towns and Cities: the Future. Delivering an Urban Renaissance*. London: DETR. 2000, pp.7-8
- ⁵ See my article 'Culture on the Tyne – Reflections on an Unsuccessful Bid' at www.umtp.org under 'Project Papers'.
- ⁶ Newcastle-Gateshead Initiative. *Building Bridges: Towards a strategy for culture in Newcastle Gateshead 2002-2011*. 2001
- ⁷ Hunt, Tristram. *Building Jerusalem: The Rise and Fall of the Victorian City*. London: Wiedenfeld and Nicholson. 2004, p.246. Hunt's final chapter helpfully compares the role of culture in the making of the Victorian city with its role in the contemporary city.
- ⁸ Index of Multiple Deprivation (2000)
- ⁹ Madanipour, Ali and Meridew, Tanya. 'Neighbourhood Governance: Capacity for Social Integration. Newcastle upon Tyne, Walker Case Study'. December 2002 (see the website for this project involving ten European Countries <http://www.infra.kth.se/sb/sp/forskning/index.html>).
- ¹⁰ Avis, Paul. *A Ministry Shaped by Mission*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark. 2005
- ¹¹ Greenwood, Robin. *Transforming Priesthood*. London: SPCK. 1994
- ¹² See the Urban ministry and Theology Project's website (www.umtp.org) for a full explanation of the collaborative way of working embodied. .
- ¹³ From Professor Hilary Russell's CUF funded evaluation of the Urban Ministry and Theology Project. 2002-2004 (unpublished).
- ¹⁴ See Langley, Bob and Robinson, Peter 'Sustainability and Regeneration in the East End of Newcastle' under project papers at www.umtp.org
- ¹⁵ See the Ouseburn Trust's website: <http://www.ouseburnvalley.org/page/index.cfm>
- ¹⁶ Healey, Patsy. "Place, Identity and Governance: transforming discourses and practices". In Hiller, Jean and Rooksby, Emma (eds). *Habitus: A Sense of Place*: Aldershot: Hants. 2005 (second edition), pp. 189-218
- ¹⁷ Sandercock, Leonie. *Mongrel Cities: Cosmopolis II*. London/New York. Continuum. 2003, pp.207ff
- ¹⁸ Matthew 14: 13-21: see Garland, David E. *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel*. London: SPCK. 1993, pp.155f