



What is Urban Mission?

Urban mission is one of the headline themes of conversation around the Church today

It is a huge subject with many and varied aspects. What contributors to the discussion mean by urban mission often differs depending on the particular urban setting in which they are working. It is not easy to generalise about the characteristics of the urban challenge. Often when we enthusiastically import solutions to ministering in urban areas in Ireland from other parts of the world they fail to live up to the hype when we get them home and take them out of their packaging. Equally, working in a Presbyterian system with inherited models of church, what seem like the best ideas of entrepreneurial church planters often don't seem to fit easily into the places in which we find ourselves. While others are designing, from scratch we find ourselves trying to refine what we are already doing and re-

aligning congregational mission to meet the challenge of our rapidly changing urban settings.

So where are we to go to be challenged and stimulated by what God would have us to do to rise to the challenge of urban mission in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland at this time and in this place?

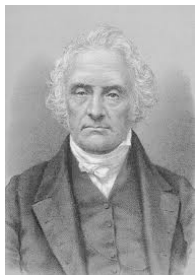
Perhaps we could do worse than to take a trip back in time to listen again to one of our Presbyterian fore-bearers and a great champion of urban mission at the time when urbanization was just beginning to impact on the landscape of 19th century Scotland. I'm speaking of Thomas Chalmers, famous as preacher, writer, theologian, church leader, social commentator, but also church planter and urban missiologist.

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Thomas Chalmers: Urban mission viewed from the shoulders of a Presbyterian giant

Without perhaps realising where they came from, you may know some of Chalmers' best known sayings such as, "expulsive power of a new affection" and "show me a people-going minister and I will show you a church-going people".



In 1815 Chalmers was called as Minister to the Tron church in central

Glasgow. His reputation quickly grew and his preaching drew huge crowds. But Chalmers was no mere pulpiteer. He felt keenly the needs of the urban environment in which his parish lay and became concerned that his middle-class congregation and approach to ministry were not touching the marginalized or the issues of urban poverty.

So, when the Glasgow City Council designated a new parish of St John's, he negotiated to take it on as a self-contained area in which he would experiment with a holistic approach

to urban mission. The "St. John's Experiment", as it became known, wasn't perfect, it had both successes and failures.

Nevertheless, Chalmers approach to urban ministry did grow a church, engage a middle-class membership in mission beyond their comfort zones and raise the educational, spiritual, and social conditions of the surrounding district by sowing the seeds of Kingdom values for community transformation.

ARE WE DOING URBAN MISSION?



Only if we are taking seriously the place where God has put us to do mission

Chalmers ministered at the turning point in which Scotland was moving from a rural to an increasingly industrialised and urban nation. He had to grapple with the issue of how a denomination which had largely shaped its life, ministry and mission around a system of scattered rural parishes came to terms with the dynamics of city life in which people lived united by close proximity but divided by social inequality. He understood that ministering in an urban situation called for significant modification to the rural parish model.

How well do we grasp that understanding our urban context needs to shape our approach to mission? In *Crossover City: Resources for Urban Mission and Transformation*, Andrew Davey writes,

‘Being urban matters. It is about who we are as well as where we live...

Being urban shapes the way we think, the way we live and the way we relate to others.’ (1)

If we are to do urban mission, place matters! The physical realities of any community shape how its people live. Is the community in which we seek to minister an estate cut off from the wider community by poor transport links? Is it a part of the city hemmed in by surrounding areas by dint of their higher economic standard or political allegiance? Is it a new development built with a highly mobile population in mind - a place to eat, sleep and come home to while the rest of life is lived in a host of other places?

Looked at from another angle, people ‘ensoul’ place. They pour into the gathering places that the physical environment has moulded for them – and that might no longer include

your church building. It may more likely be the pub, sports club, band hall or community centre. On the other hand, maybe your parish area offers none of those facilities and the challenge is to rethink how you can open up your church premises to become the hub of community life.

We need to ask ourselves how the parish and people we are trying to reach shape the way we approach ministry and mission? Are we doing that? If not, we may be doing a form of mission but continually wondering why it isn’t connecting with local people. We need to enter into the physical and social flows of the lives of the people to whom we are seeking to reach out.

Urban mission only happens where the lifestyles and patterns of urban people and the way their community life takes shape are taken seriously.

Resources to help you understand aspects of the urban world

Mission Plan Toolkit: Tell it Again (Board of Mission in Ireland)

Booklet 3: Where – The story of our local area

A host of practical tools to better understand your local area and relay findings back to the congregation in an interesting way. Specifically designed for use in an Irish Presbyterian context.

Book: Darkest England and the Way Back In Gary Bishop (Matador, 2007)

Community Leader in the Openshaw Eden Project in a Manchester inner city housing estates shares a vision for urban mission among the marginalised and disadvantaged through story, Biblical thought and personal reflection.

Book: God Next Door: Spirituality and Mission in the Neighbourhood Simon Carey Holt (Acorn Press, 2007)

Australian Simon Carey Holt has listened to the experiences of numerous men and women of faith living in a variety of urban and suburban neighbourhoods. By drawing these experiences into conversation with biblical and cultural perspectives on residential life, he uncovers the spiritual possibilities of our neighbourhoods. The result is an inspiring new agenda for local mission in the 21st century.

DVD & Participant’s Guide: Where You Live Matters: Developing A Vision for Your City Norton Herbst & Gabe Lyons (Zondervan, 2010)

American study, in which your group will be challenged by a fundamental life-style question: Should where you live dramatically shape the way you practice your faith?

ARE WE DOING URBAN MISSION?



Only if we are determined to be both locally present and engaged for mission

Chalmers was a strong advocate that any particular church should be a neighbourhood church. He took the church's responsibility for mission to the local parish seriously. He understood that, 'locality... is the secret principle wherein our greatest strength lieth...' and bemoaned that, 'everything has been permitted to run at random; and as a fruit of the utter disregard of the principle of locality, have the city clergyman and his people lost sight of each other.' (2)

While we live today in a much more mobile society than Chalmers experienced, perhaps the greatest strength the Presbyterian Church in Ireland brings to the work of Christ across the island is our presence in places where no new independent group would dream of planting a church. This is true of both rural areas and socially disadvantaged urban communities. So we are physically present in many of the 'hard places' for the gospel, but do we want to be incarnationally present and engaged in flesh and blood ways?

It is easy to deride the importance of parish boundaries, but positively they give us a slice of the Lord's harvest field to focus on. Commenting on the application of Chalmers' focus on the importance of parish to urban mission today Michael J. Ives writes,

Evangelistic responsibility must be concrete to prevent indifference on the one hand or exasperation on the other. If in the words of John Wesley the world is truly one's parish, then the burden will either be amazingly light or unspeakably onerous... But on the local model, there is a pre-determined scope. (3)

Chalmers set out to intentionally place St John's at the centre of its community's life in a host of ways that included explicit preaching, teaching and evangelism, but also more implicit Kingdom work in every sphere of social life and human development.

The danger for many of our urban congregations is that their life goes on with little or no connection to the surrounding community. The bulk of members do not live locally and drive in and out of the area before and after Sunday worship. They continue to

maintain links with the congregation because of a cherished family connection or personal affinity, rather than with the mindset of being there to intentionally relate to the local community in mission.

It is highly unlikely that we will see a trend of many members of our urban congregations moving back into the parish area having previously decided to move out for all sorts of reasons in the past. Few of our urban manses are located within parish bounds! Perhaps we can foster a new generation of members who know the compulsion of God's call to physically incarnate themselves by living in many of our socially broken communities. In the meantime, even travelling members need to be regularly challenged that if they are to be present on congregational rolls they need to be there to be engaged in and support local mission, not simply because they happened to grow up in the congregation.

Urban mission only happens where congregations are not only physically present in communities but engaging in local life across the full spectrum of mission represented by gospel and Kingdom.

Notes

(1) *Crossover City: Resources for Urban Mission and Transformation* Andrew Davey ed. (Continuum) 24

(2) *The Works of Thomas Chalmers* 14:120

(3) *Parish Evangelism: Rediscovering Focus in Evangelistic & Pastoral Effort* Michael J. Ives http://westportexperiment.files.wordpress.com/2008/09/parish_evangelism1.pdf

(4) *The Works of Thomas Chalmers* 14:109

ARE WE DOING URBAN MISSION?

Only if we are pushing out and not waiting around in mission

Chalmers' Calvinism meant that he was not optimistic about the likelihood of sinners randomly turning up at a church service to seek after Christ. As he put it, 'nature does not go forth in search of Christianity; but Christianity goes forth to knock at the door of nature, and, if possible, awaken her out of her sluggishness.' (4) This was especially unlikely to happen when many of urban poor were alienated from the forms and practices of church life through social marginalization and

educational disadvantage. In response to these circumstances Chalmers developed the idea of the importance of 'emanation' in urban mission. A church desiring to reach its local unchurched population should not operate on the basis of an 'attractional' model of mission – waiting for the local population to turn up – rather the congregation was to be pro-active in pushing its life and witness out into the community seeking to exercise a leavening influence upon the lump.

So, are we waiting for the unchurched to come in, or trying to find ways of pushing the gospel out into the

community in our approach to urban mission? So often our waiting is just a denial of the realities of an increasingly secular society or a wishful thinking about a return to the way things were. Perhaps we are also reluctant to push out because of fear or the realization that once we face the challenges of mission to people who are not like us we know many of our cherished traditions will have to change.

Urban mission only happens where congregations grasp the initiative to go in Jesus name. Any other strategy will only result in continued decline and death.



Ballysally: Reshaping church to be locally present and engaged

In the late 1990's we initiated a process of prayerful evaluation of the life and witness of the congregation. The process involved leaders and members meeting, praying, thinking and discussing together to develop a clearer vision of what the Lord was calling us to be and to do as a witness to him in Ballysally. Some significant restructuring of congregational life has taken place and there has been an ongoing attempt to evaluate and organise around our priorities so that we connect meaningfully with our community and help our members to grow to maturity in Christ.

Ballysally, like many other large Housing Executive estates became increasingly marked by welfare dependence and social problems and also suffered the negative impact of a strong paramilitary influence. Since 2003 the area has been benefiting from increased government spending in a Neighbourhood Renewal initiative which is resulting in improving conditions and a greater sense of community cohesion.

The large scale social problems in the community of Ballysally present both a challenge and opportunity. We have sought to show the love of Jesus in practical ways by trying to respond to people's felt needs where we can, we have a Homework Club and a variety of youth and children's clubs and activities to enable us to engage with disaffected young people, providing a safe space, constructive activities and opportunities to listen and talk. We provide support for young people at risk of suspension from school and their families and we are developing the same approach for young people involved in other risk taking behaviours.



Urban Mission



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STORY - BALLYLOUGHAN CONNECT



For the past four years, Ballyloughan in Ballymena have run a special 'connect' season (formerly known as The Church has Left the Building) during the months of May and June. The aim of this two month programme is for as many church members as possible to give special focus to 'connecting' with those in our community and in our friendship circles who have little or no connection with church. The connect season consists of '**Connect Wednesdays**' where on Wednesday evenings members of the church go into the community as part of different teams: a home visitation team who carry out door to door visitation with well-produced literature with the aim not

just of putting leaflets through doors but genuinely connecting with people; a Streetserve Team who carry out practical tasks such as gardening for people who are unable to do so themselves; a Games Team working with children in the local green; a Youth Team engaging with the local young people through a variety of activities; and a prayer team who are sometimes praying in people's homes in the community and sometimes doing a prayer walk. Alongside this the church also run **Connect Events**, including a football tournament; a night for women including pampering, desserts & live music; a concert for senior citizens; a family fun day.

The connect season has over the past year developed into a year round **Connect Team**. This consists of a team of folk who really caught the vision of the Connect Season and wanted to continue on its work throughout the year. The team consists of people who are free during the day on Fridays, or in some cases work extra hours during the week so they can be free on Fridays! This team continue with the work of regular follow-up visitation of those whom we have connected with, providing friendship, practical care and prayer to lots of people with all kinds of stories. As a result of this ongoing work, more children from the community have joined the church's children and youth organisations, a number of people from the local community with no church background whatsoever have gone through simplified versions of courses such as Alpha, and a very simple Bible study is now being held on a weekly basis for about 10 people who have come to faith or are seriously considering it. The key to all of this has been taking the initiative, being prepared to put on events and programmes, but more importantly, being prepared to take the initiative to step outside of the comfort zone, spending time with people as individuals, listening to their stories, displaying compassion, praying for them, inviting them and walking with them.

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

Matthew 5:14–16

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