

The Report from the Commission on Urban Life and Faith



Faithful Cities

A call for celebration, vision and justice



Contents

Methodist Publishing House
4 John Wesley Road
Peterborough
PE4 6ZP

Church House Publishing
Church House
Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3NZ

HB5852-315-X

ISBN-1-85852-315-6

Published 2006 by Methodist
Publishing House and Church
House Publishing

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Designed by 52design and
advertising

Printed in England by Stanley
Hunt (printers) Ltd

Front cover

Main cover photo:

FB-infinity photography © 2005

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	Foreword	iv
	Introduction	v
1	Faithful Cities: Places of Celebration, Vision and Justice	1
2	Continuity and Change	7
3	The World in Our Cities: Diversity and Difference	17
4	Prosperity: In Pursuit of Well-being	30
5	Regeneration for People: More than Status, Power and Profit	45
6	A Good City: Urban Regeneration with People in Mind	54
7	Involved and Committed	66
8	Grounding and Sustaining Faithful Capital	76
	Recommendations	89
	Notes	92
	Photo Credits	98
	Acknowledgements	100



Foreword



This report is offered by the Commission on Urban Life and Faith with the intention of stimulating discussion and action among those whose lives are lived out in an urban setting and those to whom is given the responsibility for formulating policies that affect these lives.

The process through which we have passed in the last two years has been important to us. We have met and talked with hundreds of people in cities and towns. We have visited projects that have inspired and stimulated us and we are deeply indebted to those who have shared generously their insights, wisdom, visions and frustrations and helped us to understand more of the delights, injustices and needs of urban living. It is often at the local level that the language of love, hope, judgement, forgiveness, remembrance and hospitality combine to offer something tangible.

We are all too aware that this report is more 'work in progress' than a definitive conclusion to our activities and discussions. We have reflected on our experiences and offer our observations and some recommendations, but it is a changing scene, not least because of government initiatives and the renewed vigour among people of faith.

The recommendations we make rise out of the conviction that there is already much to be celebrated, that visions of a renewed citizenship have the potential for a society in which all flourish and that justice is the bedrock of well-being.

Beyond all this is the conviction that God is in the city and the kingdom of God is at hand.



Kathleen Richardson

The Revd Baroness Richardson of Calow,
Chair of the Commission on Urban Life and Faith

Introduction

Quite early on in this report you will find a chart setting out some of the things that have changed since the publication, twenty one years ago, of *Faith in the City* - and some of the things that haven't changed as well. It is a very instructive overview, which will help to explain some of the main directions and aspirations of this new contribution to thinking about our urban future.

The Commission that produced *Faith in the City* was faced with the task of alerting a public and a Government that seemed to be imperfectly aware of the impact of its policies upon the poorest in Britain to the urgency of public investment in combating urban destitution; and it also galvanized the Church into action, generating the Church Urban Fund, which has been one of the most effective and often (sadly) one of the least celebrated resources in urban regeneration over recent decades.

But the British city, like the rest of British and global society, has moved on. Urban redevelopment has transformed one landscape after another. Patterns of work and employment have altered radically. Ethnic and religious pluralism are far more evident; and the issues around religious plurality, not least (but not only) in relation to our British Muslim communities, have become more and more complex and pressing. In responding to destitution and disadvantage, the culture is one dominated by the model of partnership. The polarization often taken for granted two decades ago between state-generated solutions and private charity - always a gross over-simplification - has long faded away. It is no exaggeration to speak, as this report does, of a 'regeneration industry'.

Yet the questions to be asked are as sharp and uncomfortable as they were in 1985. What drives regeneration - the actual needs of communities or the agenda of developers? What messages are given by the quality and character of the built environment? Are we creating new kinds of exclusion by building policies that reduce the social mix of an area? And, very importantly, how do we change the hectic atmosphere of much regeneration work, harried by rapidly changing and highly complicated government requirements and dominated by short-term and sometimes superficial or cosmetic goals? How do we create partnerships that can find their own appropriate pace for development and their own appropriate levels of accountability, in a way that will leave communities with an enhanced sense of their resources and capacities? Too often at present, as the report

spells out, the reality is of deeply frustrated workers, trying to juggle immensely complex demands and left after three years with projects half-realized and local hopes disappointed.

This is where the central idea of the report comes in: 'faithful capital'. While admitting the slightly doubtful aura that hangs around the word 'capital' in this context, the writers argue that the Church represents a resource which is bound to think in terms of sustained commitment. Its fundamental beliefs are about such commitment - God's commitment to a people, Christ's commitment to a weak and failing body of human followers, the commitment embodied (literally) in incarnation and resurrection. The question the Church always has to ask of any society, and any project within society, is about how it reflects the kind of enduring commitment to individuals and groups that builds them up and changes them and makes them what they can be. In other words, the deeper issues around regeneration and development that are raised in this report are to do with how our corporate life shows something of what God is like and thus something of what humanity, made in God's image, might be.

The resources of 'faith communities', now so significant in public thinking about regeneration and the fight against disadvantage, are not just a matter of assorted and ill-defined moral values; they are to do with what sort of God is believed in and what awkward questions are made possible by such a God. The specific contribution from the Judeo-Christian tradition is to point to a God who is above all characterized by faithfulness. It is God's faithfulness that is the most profound resource for all our life together as human beings. And the challenge that this report puts before us is how we who live out of that eternal faithfulness can keep faith with our neighbours.

It is a challenge we need to hear, and we should be profoundly grateful to the writers of this report for setting it before us with such a wealth of narrative, analysis and vision; grateful also to all those who, by using 'faithful capital' in all the varied contexts of urban life today, have begun to show us what is possible for our society. I hope that these pages will prompt as radical and long-lasting a response, in Church and society, as did *Faith in the City* in its day.

Dr Rowan Williams,
Archbishop of Canterbury

1 Faithful Cities:

Places of Celebration, Vision and Justice

A view from the London Eye

[81]

Imagine that you are taking your nephew or niece for a ride on the giant ferris wheel on the bank of the Thames, the London Eye, and using the occasion to say something about the structures of society. The first thing you both see are the great buildings of Westminster and Whitehall. These, you say, are the homes of government, and government is about the concentration and distribution of power. Next you see shops and offices, and in the distance the Stock Exchange. These, you explain, are the home of the market, and the market is about the production and distribution of wealth. Then your nephew or niece notices the dome of St Paul's and the various church spires still visible between the tower blocks and asks, 'What are those?' You explain that they are houses of worship. 'And what,' he or she asks, 'do they produce and distribute?' Our first inclination might be to say that they are not that sort of place at all. This, I want to suggest, would be an error, but no mere error. In a certain sense it is a defining error of our culture.[1]

© Jonathan Sacks



1. What is it that makes our towns and cities flourish? In the words of the question that has animated this Commission throughout its deliberations, 'What makes a good city?' This is essentially what Jonathan Sacks is asking – what criteria do we use to judge its most significant qualities?
2. Clearly politics and economics are fundamental but when it comes to identifying the wellsprings of a society's core values – what Sacks calls its 'moral sense' – we need to consider other, less tangible, dimensions. Chief among these are the contributions made to the common good by religious faith. In fact, in this report we claim that there is something which we call 'faithful capital' – a quality related to 'social capital' (a term in common currency among urban commentators). Faithful capital is something that can be found in abundance in the congregations and communities of faith and is – we will argue – crucial to the survival and sustenance of urban life.
3. Faith is still vibrant, diverse and alive in the city. As Jonathan Sacks lyrically observes, you can see the signs of it when you scan the skyline of any of our cities. But this faith is not just signalled in church spires, in the domes and pillars of mosques, synagogues, temples and gurdwaras. It is also powerfully present in the hearts and minds of millions of twenty-first-century citizens and, springing from those faithful lives, it is present too in the countless daily actions inspired by religious hope, belief and obligation.
4. Twenty years ago, when *Faith in the City*, the report of the Archbishop's Commission on Urban Priority Areas was published, media pundits could have been excused if they had predicted a very different picture. Conventional wisdom suggested a gradual but irreversible dwindling in the profile and influence of religion in our towns and cities. And while Sunday church attendance has fallen steadily until recently, that is in part because the story of faith in twenty-first-century urban Britain is being transformed.
5. Our two-year-long study has found that faith is now a more dynamic and significant factor in our cities than it was 20 years ago. Not only has the Church



Millennium Values

At the beginning of 2000, representatives of all major faith communities entered into an Act of Commitment. They said:

'We commit ourselves as people of many faiths, to work together for the common good, uniting to build a better society, grounded in values and ideals we share:

- *Community, personal integrity, a sense of right and wrong;*
- *Learning, wisdom and love of truth;*
- *Care and compassion, justice and peace;*
- *Respect for one another, for the earth and its creatures.*

We commit ourselves, in a spirit of friendship and co-operation, to work together alongside all who share our values and ideals, to help bring about a better world now and for generations to come.'

A Shared Act of Reflection and Commitment by the Faith Communities of the United Kingdom, 2 January 2000

Urban Fund, which sprang from the *Faith in the City* report, catalysed Christian engagement in our urban centres, but now there is a broader contribution, for instance of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities, than previously. And today the Government recognizes the uniquely significant role of faith communities in social cohesion, education and regeneration. But the organized religion of the major historic faiths does not monopolize issues of faith and spirituality. There is now a wider, less coherent, assent among British people that our world is more than matter.

1.6 The language of 'spirituality' is often associated with what sociologists have called 'self-religions', characterized by personal quests for meaning or with the pursuit of 'New Age' therapies and techniques. While not denying the virtue or authenticity of such explorations, that is not the territory we map in this report.

1.7 We are talking about a spirituality which, while universal, is specifically and historically expressed in the major world faiths. At its most basic level, this is a vision of reality that goes beyond the material and the physical - our human experience is part of something larger than itself. And because our common origins are in God we have a connectedness with all other created beings, including nature. And it is our task to sustain and enhance life for all.

1.8 Clearly, all these faith traditions are diverse within themselves as well as in relation to one another, with points of difference as well as convergence in their teachings. Yet they share core principles and convictions from which this common 'moral sense' - which informs faithful capital - emerges. What we glimpse through the inherited wisdom of our faith traditions lies at the heart of our lives together as communities and people of faith, and it constitutes the essence of the insights we offer in this report.

1.9 What we have to say grows out of three key convictions: about what we understand about the nature of God; about what it means to be human; and about how humanity should live in community together.

1.10 First, we understand God to be source of all life from whom all creation draws its purpose and character. Secondly, we understand that to be human means that we are made 'in the image and likeness of God', and that therefore each person possesses an innate and irreducible dignity. Thirdly, our traditions speak of humanity being called into relationship with God and that human purpose and destiny is fulfilled in relationships of mutuality, love and justice.

Discovering faithful capital

1.11 It follows, then, that the quality of our life in community - secular and religious - should be an outworking of this model of human and divine in relationship. Our 'moral sense' of society tells us that *life itself* is sacred, that our *individual lives* are interconnected and our *common life* should be constructed to enable all people to flourish. This is the wellspring of faithful capital.

1.12 One of the most powerful gifts that faith-based organizations have to offer is that they are instructed to 'practise what they preach'. A commitment to human flourishing and a vision of the good city can therefore never simply remain at the level of doctrine or abstract principles - it finds its expression in a myriad of locally based, grassroots activity - what Leonie Sandercock calls 'a thousand tiny empowerments'(2) - that seek to make a difference.

1.13 Herein lies the notion of faithful capital. There is already a growing familiarity with the idea of 'social capital'. This term describes the way that people are enriched not only by their ownership of physical and financial assets or by the 'human capital' of their skills and qualifications, but also by their social relationships and participation in social networks. Sociologist John Field sums it up in two words, 'relationships matter'. He continues: 'By making connections with one another, and keeping them going over time, people are able to work together to achieve things that they either could not achieve by themselves, or could only achieve with great difficulty. People connect through a series of networks and they tend to share common values with other members of these

networks: to the extent that these networks constitute a resource, they can be seen as forming a kind of capital.[3]

This emphasis on human relationships and connections holds an immediate attraction, not least for Christians. The development of social capital also seems very significant in attempts to build the connections and trust necessary for living together in a diverse community and society.

It has to be said that social capital is the subject of keen debate and criticism. Some see the language of 'capital' as reducing human relationships to an instrumental currency and as being bound to governmental economic and social calculations, priorities and policies. Many (not least faith and community participants in regeneration) question this. And, of course, not all social networks and the stocks of social capital that they harbour are benign - including religion itself.

Nevertheless, we see 'social capital' as an essentially helpful idea. And we suggest that, at their best, churches and Christians - alongside congregations of other faiths and their adherents - offer a particular gift to communities. We have chosen to call this gift 'faithful capital'.[4] In corporate and personal worship, prayer, reading and meditation there is regular and explicit reminder and celebration of the gift of life and recognition and remembrance of guilt, forgiveness and healing. This inspires the commitment to personal and collective transformation, love for neighbour and care for 'the stranger', and to human dignity and social justice. Genuinely distinctive and important contributions to wider social capital are made when this faith is acted out in the wider community in authentic local engagement. Two particular distinguishing elements of faithful capital are its *language* and its *practices*.

The language of 'love', 'hope', 'judgement', 'forgiveness', 'remembrance' and 'hospitality' combine to form a distinctive 'story'. The very meaning of 'regeneration' (a word with strong religious roots) is given a deeper spiritual and social significance that challenges dominant definitions in public policy.

Similarly, the practical ways of working of many churches and other local congregations is often distinctive. Although there has been a growth in the number of 'churches of choice', which draw people from long distances, there are still many 'churches of place' with strong local connections. This local rootedness is often very longstanding, encouraging a commitment to people that is tolerant of slow progress and assigns importance to particular relationships and the needs of specific people and groups. In research funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, people of faith spoke of the importance of recognizing and accepting fallibility and failure and of responding with patience and perseverance - given hope by their belief in ultimate love, justice and reconciliation.[5] A further widely held value emerged in research by the William Temple Foundation, which identified genuine participation and working together with other organizations as an essential element of faithful capital.[6]

From a governmental point of view, the social capital and, specifically, the faithful capital offered by Christian churches and other faith organizations can be seen as both a valuable resource and as a source of discomfiture. Commitment to neighbourhood, long-term presence, strong value base, important community facilities, bridging inter-faith networks - they all offer paths to the goals of 'community cohesion' and urban 'regeneration'. On the other hand, the distinct and conflicting language of faith, the values that challenge rather than support government policy, and working styles that fail to mesh with time-limited, benchmark-driven outcome-required government schemes, all pose a challenge.

We are not saying that only people or communities of faith have anything to offer in the making of good cities. We pay tribute to the thousands of people who would not claim - and in some cases would shun - association with religion or faith, yet who selflessly work for the common good. We also want to recognize that there are many people of faith who choose to put their talents and energy at the disposal of secular organizations and institutions, rather than through specifically religious initiatives. It is all to the good.



121. If the notion of faithful capital is the 'Big Idea' at the heart of this report, it is not the only one. However, almost all the other major planks of the report are associated with this core theme.

122. Fundamental to faithful capital, for instance is the very presence of people and communities of faith in our country's most deprived urban areas. The Church of England, in particular, because of its parish system, has buildings and networks of people given over to the long-term service of its geographical neighbours, regardless of the volatile chemistry of demography and property values. Not only are faith communities in cities physically present, they are actively, dutifully and often passionately engaged in caring for those who need care most.

123. In our ethnically and socially diverse cities - where fear of 'the other' stalks the streets, and where both rich and poor are tempted to ghettoize - conventional wisdom calls for a spirit of tolerance. The faithful, at best, reject this passive and paternalistic entreaty, calling instead for acts of hospitality - extending beyond the usual boundaries of nationality, race, creed, gender or class - drawn from ancient traditions which demand a welcome for the stranger.

124. Faithfulness demands a critical rather than a docile partnership with the agencies of regeneration and development - be they government or commercial. This means that some fundamental questions need to be asked about the criteria for successful urban redevelopment. Individual prosperity, growth and land value are not sufficient on their own. Happiness, well-being and public space, for example, all need to be accounted for and valued. All these make for a good city.

125. The experience of the faithful on the ground is that the poor - if not getting quantifiably poorer - are the losers in a widening gulf between themselves and those who were growing more prosperous. There is a supreme irony in the way that when redevelopment and regeneration take place, too often it is people experiencing poverty who are moved or stranded. Scandalously, we live in one of the most unequal countries in Europe,[7] where the 'trickle down' promise of market forces has failed to deliver, and where a draconian asylum system consigns a small section of the population to unacceptable destitution.

126. This report is committed to empowerment and participation, grounded in a vision of human dignity and equal value. The Commission found that many visions of the good city depend on the 'top-down' imposition of values and projects. But if the dominant idea of much urban regeneration is one of 'delivering a good city to the people', then faith traditions offer alternative understandings. In the Hebrew Scriptures, when the people of Israel were instructed to build a 'tabernacle' or place of divine dwelling, they were instructed both to make it portable and to ensure that its construction reflected the labour and gifts of the people (Exodus 26). This serves as a reminder that the divine never has a final resting-place - the labours of the people have a role in building the sacred as well as the profane. Cities, as human dwelling places which somehow prefigure and point to the presence of God within them, are always 'under construction', and need the active and continuing participation of all parts of the community to fulfil their potential.

127. In geographer Doreen Massey's words, 'the making of the city goes on'.^[8] Our contemporary cities are also always under construction - we celebrate the vitality and dynamism of cities and their ability to receive and integrate the offerings of newcomers as well as their established members.

128. In this report, we argue that despite its ambivalent history, and its capacity to incite hatred and conflict, religious faith is still one of the richest, most enduring and most dynamic sources of energy and hope for cities. Faith is a vital - and often essential - resource in the building of relationships, and communities, in the values they promote, in the service they inspire, and in the resources they command, faith-based organizations make a decisive difference to their communities. So we return to Jonathan Sacks' illustration of the 'bird's-eye-view' of London, and affirm with him the significance of a 'spiritual dimension' to our evaluation of urban life and faith.



Summary of chapters

We begin in Chapters 2 and 3 by addressing the dramatic change in the nature of urban life over the past 20 years. In Chapter 2, we review the impact of *Faith in the City* (the report of the Archbishop's Commission on Urban Priority Areas) since it was published 20 years ago, in 1985. Enormously influential and controversial in its day, its trenchant criticism of government policy and its recommendations left a vital legacy. We examine that legacy and outline our response to the new urban vista of the twenty-first century.

One dramatic change in 20 years, as Chapter 3 indicates, is the huge amount of religious and cultural diversity in our major cities and towns. Globalization has brought ambiguities and fears as well as riches and opportunities with this diversity. This can, and has, bred hostility and the advent of rejectionist, 'furious religion', [9] together with new expressions of racism and xenophobia.

There is a danger that as cities become more diverse, so different communities co-exist in parallel with no points of contact or common ground. Often we experience our neighbours as strangers. Chapter 3 therefore asks if religious faith, far from being a divisive force, can be a source of solidarity and cohesion - turning 'strangers' into 'neighbours' through proactive hospitality.

Chapter 4 traces the new map of poverty and prosperity and concludes that, once again, the values of faith have a positive potential. Even living in the lap of prosperity we find an impoverishment in people's sense of well-being. As the Government strives to tackle the inequalities in our society, it has to face the fact that economic indicators alone are inadequate reflections of social and personal prosperity, and find more inclusive measures that reflect people's deeper needs.

Levels of debt, the correlation between poverty and other measures of deprivation, such as poor health, vulnerability to crime and low educational attainment are an urgent matter of conscience. So too is the gulf between the values of urban communities themselves and those who seek purely economic solutions upon them.

In Chapter 5, therefore, we hear some of the stories of those who challenge the shortcomings of an overemphasis on status, power and profit. We dig deeper into the disjunction between the official aspirations of regeneration and their real impact, and discover that the rhetoric frequently falls short of reality.

This points to some questions: for whose benefit is regeneration? And who represents the long-term interests of local communities if they are at odds with the 'short-termist', target-driven culture of the regeneration industry? We chart how faith-based organizations and their coalitions are ideally placed to take on such a representative role and mobilize their communities around common interests.

Chapter 6 looks at the way cities have developed over the centuries and then moves to a more extended reflection on some of the values and perspectives that might inform processes of growth and regeneration. What constitutes a sustainable and just urban society, and what might be the continuing role of the churches and other faith traditions?

'What makes a good city?' has been a key question for the Commissioners. By asking this simple question in our seminars, meetings and visits, we have been able to dig deeper into the underlying values informing many of the most ambitious programmes of regeneration currently under way in our major cities - not only in the UK, but internationally.

As Chapter 6 argues, strategies for regeneration frequently coalesce around four key principles of a good or successful city: (1) economics, (2) environment and infrastructure, (3) politics and governance and (4) culture. These four 'pillars of regeneration' relate to questions of physical resources, wealth-creation, sustainability and political structures. What they don't do is to take into account less quantifiable questions such as quality of life, well-being, happiness



even – what we might term the ‘human face’ of the city. We have to ask questions about the *soul* of the city as well, and about how faith communities can help develop this.

1.39 Chapter 7 examines some of the dilemmas facing faith-based organizations that enter into partnerships with local government in various projects of neighbourhood renewal, provision of services, capacity building and community development. The chapter argues that such concern for the well-being of the society is rooted in a radically inclusive vision of human flourishing and is something to be shared across the boundaries of faith. It identifies the beginnings of a ‘public theology’ of involvement that draws upon the core principles of hospitality, communion and incarnation.

1.40 Yet it is also important to ask whether faith-based organizations’ involvement with various regeneration programmes has resulted in a distortion of their own priorities. Is it possible for faith groups to construct partnerships that deliver real regeneration and without simply being co-opted by those in power?

1.41 Chapter 8 celebrates the dogged and heroic presence of congregations in beleaguered urban areas and asks about the cost of such involvement on often quite fragile embattled communities, and what needs to be done to equip, support and sustain them. Just as *Faith in the City* addressed the question of resourcing Urban Priority churches in the service of their local communities, therefore, so we will be concerned to ask what kinds of ‘capacity building’ are necessary for the long-term effectiveness of faith-based organizations.

1.42 We are realistic about the state of our cities and urban areas, but we are not gloomy. We celebrate the diversity, the ebb and flow of change and the way that the global becomes local, and personal. And we have a vision of the good city rooted in the love, determination and the uncompromising call for justice and peace that arises from faithful capital. This is a city which is continually being built.

