

## Reflections on the Urban Life Journey

Thanks to Anna, Andrew and Carmel for the invitation to reflect on the Urban Life journey. Perhaps the value of reflection at this point is not so much in reviewing achievements and impacts (Anna did a good job there with the impact study) but on the things that have really come alive to me personally in relation to my own faith journey. Although I say 'my own' faith journey, this really is not a helpful description as the indispensable heart of the journey has been the experience of being with others who are also seeking and struggling to live out Christian faith in meaningful ways in their own places.

From a personal perspective Urban Life has been an amazing gift that has enabled me to be fully immersed in the new spheres that were being opened up to me through the combined experience of living in Knowle West and of PhD studies. I have come to understand this immersion in terms of a practical or lived theology which has opened up to me a sense of God-in-the-world and God-in-the-other in ways that were previously largely unseen to me. Helped by others I have found new depth, new energy and fresh horizons opening up in relation to faith in God and earthed Christian spirituality.

The journey has also unearthed a series of disturbing questions and disorientating insights. I have gradually come to understand and value the experience of discomfort (or being bothered or disturbed) as a necessary and constant companion in the journey with God in the world and to reflect on how to hold these experiences and try to live patiently with them rather than seek to 'solve' them or 'sort them out'. One of the more difficult aspects of this to live with is the disjuncture or wounding that I find in relation to Christian sisters and brothers (mainly brothers!) who seem immersed in and bound by denominational concerns and institutional ambition. I know that I am not myself completely free from these things, but Urban Life (along with a few other associated groups and individuals) has opened up a thoughtful and hospitable space to explore the questions and challenges thrown up by these experiences.

Whilst there is much to be said about the processes and findings of practical theology, the journey has for me found expression in two mutual interconnected experiences. First, the encounter with people of different cultural and life experience ('others') and second reflection on these experiences. Like two sides of the same coin these experiences are inextricable and interdependent. Each of them can be understood as a conversational space where the 'otherness' of God might be encountered and the transformative work of the spirit experienced. What has emerged then at every turn has been the necessity to explore the practice of good conversation as the basis of doing theology. The gift of Urban Life has been the opportunity to be involved in conversation in so many situations, where conversations have been both one-to-one or in a group – most often around a table or with food, coffee and sometimes wine! In conversation, we have often brought back to the question 'yes ... but what does that actually look like in practice?' (this has certainly been one of the gifts of the Urban Life core team - thanks folks). So I will conclude this reflection by trying to identify (very briefly) at least a few of the things that for me outline what a practical or lived theology 'actually looks like'.

**Hospitable conversation:** the outstanding moments in the UL journey have been around the quality of conversation. Conversely the difficult times have often been characterised by a sense that the conversation is not somehow 'working'. Quality conversation has opened a space where deeper learning takes place, relationships have grown, new insights have emerged, and where there is a sense of God-in-the-midst.

Hospitable conversation must be named as the essential basis for good practical theological reflection; it eschews theological learning as a platform for so-called experts to display their knowledge and values **all** the voices in the room - being especially attentive to those whose voices are less often recognised; it is difficult to learn and difficult to facilitate as the emphasis moves from on the one hand a relatively safe approach of delivering a prearranged package of knowledge to, on the other hand, participating in the necessary vulnerability of a multi-voiced experience where the knowledge resides in the group as a whole.

**Self-awareness:** for me time with the UL core team and the many other interactions have been an outstanding opportunity to learn about my own self, to feel more comfortable in my own skin and to value the moments of vulnerability of others who have made space to explore the deeper aspects of their own lives (anxieties, prejudices, motivations, etc). Over the past few years it has become clear that the capacity to be self-aware (reflexive) is one of the central characteristics of theological reflection that actually connects to a community or place; it is the quality that transforms theology from statements of doctrine which remain essentially detached from everyday reality to lived expressions of faith; it is the critical practice that brings to light the power dynamics that otherwise remain unacknowledged.

**Critical capacity:** the space to do rigorous practical theology and at the same time to be open to other voices (of experience and of social sciences for example).

**Reflection on Practice:** a key part of the experience of the past 4 years has been the way that it has become a shared journey (even to the extent that I have now needed to lay down my part of the journey and trust others to shape it!). Sharing has not been a simple process where others have bought into a pre-existing vision. It has entailed an open hearted, rigorous and honest conversation that has changed the whole feel of UL. Urban Life can no longer be (mis)construed as 'Mike's' thing – it has been co-created through a process of reflection and struggle. Though consuming of time and energy this experience of deep reflection on practice serves as touchstone for the journey in the future. That is to say that theological education at any level is well served when it is grounded on a rhythm of reflective practice.

#### **A final thought: Is there space in the market place for an UL approach?**

It has been helpful to wrestle together as a core team over questions about the financial sustainability of an UL approach to learning in a market place which is packed with training providers and where unrealistically low fees are the norm.

My own sense is that we have begun to discover and demonstrate that there is real space for a network like UL. The following reasons spring to mind:

- The provision of franchising projects which promise ready-made solutions to poverty is being pushed aggressively in the Christian world. Whilst popular in some areas there is also serious disquiet amongst many about the underlying values to such an approach. As a reflective and contextual learning method UL is well positioned to provide a completely different approach.

- It seems that the growing assertiveness in conservative evangelical circles and the associated emphasis on 'straight-forward' evangelism and congregational growth is resulting in an increasing sense of disenfranchisement amongst those who do not fit into these structures. UL could (and does) connect well with those who feel disenfranchised in this way yet still want to live out Christian faith and do good theology in ways that connect with everyday social experience.
- Training provision in denominations: my sense is that denominations and mission organisations are increasingly looking for training providers who can bring resources in the areas of mission and Christian engagement in society. Partly for the reasons stated in the first two points, it seems that there are not so many places that can offer support in competent theological reflection for ministers and practitioners on the ground in 'tough' places. Included in this category are both ministerial training but more especially the growing emphasis amongst Anglican dioceses and Baptist Associations for continued ministerial development.
- There is a (relatively) small, but growing emphasis on practical theology within ministry and mission circles and this is increasingly including the use of ethnographic approaches. I would say that UL fits well within this cohort and is somewhat ahead of the curve in the sense that it has developed approaches to learning that are flexible and contextual.

So, I hope that all this makes sense. It is written with a sense of enormous gratitude for the way in which you Carmel, Anna and Andrew have participated on this journey, with all its twists and turns. In moving to a new post in IBTSC I see a continuation of the core values which I have expressed here and I am fully aware that this will depend on the presence of open-hearted conversational partners. My hope is that the four of us will somehow manage to sustain the quality of conversation that we have become familiar with over the past few years. This must certainly involve food around a table somewhere in Amsterdam!

Peace

Mike