

## **Building Utopia – seeking the authentic Church for new communities.**

**Ed. Laurie Green and Chris Baker (SPCK, 2008)**

### **Resume**

The genesis of this book emerged from the thinking of a small group established to provide a contribution to the *Faithful Cities* report in 2006 on the churches' experience of engagement in new urban areas. These areas included (historically) the New towns built from the 1950s through to the 1970s, but also the current expansions to existing conurbations and towns and experiments in new urbanism.

Because the reflections of the group were not incorporated into the *Faithful Cities* report, it was decided to do a more thoroughgoing enquiry into the nature of the experience of what the book sometimes describes as Edge Urban Developments, and to reflect on the theological and strategic implications of that experience. Because the location and experience of most of the team is in the Southeast of England, it was decided that the focus of this enquiry should be the Thames Gateway expansion – a 30 mile long linear city stretching along both sides of the Thames Estuary which aims to create new settlements linked to existing towns sufficient to meet an anticipated demand for housing and services for an extra million people by the year 2016.

The book attempts to deliver this enquiry via a structure that begins with an historic overview of new settlements in the UK (including the more Utopian ideals behind the Garden City and New Town movements). It then moves into firsthand narratives from both existing populations and newcomers within the Gateway of their experience of living in this area. Other narratives are then brought into play as part of the analysis, including those of the strategic visionaries of the Thames Gateway (architects, planners, politicians, advisors) and those tasked with implementing some of that vision on the ground (i.e. the public sector). A survey of other new urban areas in the UK helps put the Thames Gateway experience into broader context, and an emerging list of church-based responses in these areas begins to emerge.

The final three chapters begin (in true hermeneutical cycle fashion) to do some strategic and theological reflection on these gathered strands of experience. This includes a biblical reflection in the theme of Utopia as located in the vision of the New Jerusalem (at the end of the Book of Revelation), a typology of emerging church responses, and finally a manifesto which seeks to articulate what makes a good city and the role of the church in enabling others (as well as itself) to fulfil some of the outcomes of this manifesto. These manifesto points include:

- Sustainable communities of well-being
- Contested public spaces
- Democratic urban communities
- A theology of relationships
- A theology of partnerships
- Establishing community and identity in new urban areas
- Making public space sacred again

To some extent these manifesto points express what we as the writing team find to be largely absent from these new urban communities, and this creates a surprisingly downbeat yet also assertive tone to the book.

The central concept of Utopia for example, is double-edged, and we deploy it in an ambiguous way. The Gateway communities do not have the intense creativity and socially-transforming rhetoric associated with previous new developments, be they Ebenezer Howard's Garden City or Le Corbusier's *Ville Radieuse*. And yet, in the terms of their limited ambition, these new communities in the Thames Gateway are still suffused with a marketing rhetoric of dream communities, new starts and choice and opportunity – a *Utopia lite* if you will.

However, this book, completed in the lengthening shadows of the impending credit crash is prescient on the extent to which even these limited aspirations for community and the built environment are being revised and sacrificed to the demands of the global investment market. This book locates and articulates the shallow nature of the foundations (literally) these new communities will be built on with unerring focus. The architect raises the question of what future generations might find by way of cultural artefacts or building outlines that will tell them what the Thames Gateway stood for. Where will be the cultural infrastructures – places of worship, libraries, education establishments, galleries, theatres - once the twin craters of Bluewater and Lakeside have been excavated (these must have been important spaces, our future cousins will muse, since all roads and transport links seemed to meet there)? The environmental advisor wonders why so much of the new housing will be built on the flood plain, while one of the poorer residents of the Silvertown Estate built in the 1950s sees her new neighbours coming in from the London City Airport railway station with 'faces like wet weekends'. The chance of new neighbours meeting each other in Canning Town's New Britannia estate seem similarly slim given that the housing association properties are 'squeezed between the main road and a wall which divides them from the private dockside properties'. Meanwhile, the new Asian and African middle classes seem pleased enough with their executive homes and better schools on the private estates further out in the Gateway in places like Chafford Hundred near Purfleet and Greenhithe. But the general perception is that these are commuter dormitory spaces, filling up on the back of rising house prices. Now the credit crunch has hit the private sector with such force, are these latest additions to the middle class beginning to rue the overinflated value of their main asset, namely their house?

Meanwhile, the ongoing search for community and deeper symbolic connectedness, perhaps lying under the surface of all the shiny new brochures, is reflected in the story of the discovery of a US airman's body and airplane, preserved in the clay foundations of Chafford Hundred. This is now the site of a new war memorial and thus the focus for an annual public celebration of rootedness, identity and common shared experience. It represents a rare moment of public expression and coming together in this new urban area that perhaps offers glimpses of a future genuine community experience and identity.

So what of the churches response to these shifting and still fluid spaces of coming and going, spaces of nascent community and unambiguous investment and which are surprisingly diverse, yet with no metanarrative of citizenship or identity?

Our book found plenty of enterprising good practice, much of it centred on open-ended social events and the nurturing of fragile identities amidst apparently high levels of loneliness and threats

to health and happiness (such as debt, overwork, alcohol-abuse and obesity). These churches we classified as 'communal' churches, because they see their role as creating and fostering local community. Larger scale efforts coming perhaps from a more evangelical persuasion focussed on themes of prosperity or consumerism, which are quite well suited (rather than antagonistic towards) the utilitarianism of the Thames Gateway landscape. These we have identified as an 'associational' type of church which gathers members from specific client groups based on ethnicity or lifestyle.

Yet is this piecemeal approach to church development sufficient? We are clear in this respect; that a return to a 'one style fits all' ecumenical approach as tried in the New Towns is both top-heavy and unduly bureaucratic for what is a complex and fluid space. However, the absence of clear principles and underpinning mission values is in danger of creating a *church lite* which might simply reflect, with unerring accuracy, a utopia lite. Hence our 'manifesto' at the end of the book, which stresses the importance of creating viable and symbolic public spaces as well as private ones. These public spaces nurture not only the soul and its immaterial needs, but also produce public spaces of political transformation which will hopefully lead to the creation of just and sustainable urban spaces. These outcomes will be achieved in different ways depending on local contexts and circumstances, but at least we hope that we have produced a reasonably clear roadmap.

## **Conclusion**

The issues raised in this book are still unfolding and evolving, not least because of the catastrophic impact on the future planning of the Thames Gateway and other Edge Urban Developments created by the current recession. What is the future of these areas in the short to medium term? What is the response of the churches and other parts of the faith sector to this failing landscape? And what other resources (theological and moral, as well as strategic) should we be bringing to the table? Can we engage the symbol of the divine New Jerusalem for example, with secular understandings of Utopia so that the aspirations of ordinary people can be heard and set alongside the visions of planners and financiers?

In short, where are the sources of Utopian vision within this situation, and what sort of Utopianism do we need?

Chris Baker, April 2009