

Ministry in the Context of Regeneration:

Proclaiming the Gospel in Capital Cities

Berlin/Brandenberg-London Link - 4th May 2000

This short lecture was delivered to a mixed audience of specialists in Urban Ministry drawn from Berlin and London. They met together at the invitation of the Diocese of London at St Katherine's Foundation, Limehouse, East London.

When thinking about Regeneration schemes I am still always tempted to consider the **story of Nehemiah**. Nehemiah's massive regeneration of the City of Jerusalem. The prototypical developer, parachuting in from outside the situation, backed by wealthy palace resources. He does not tell locals what he's about till he's got his agenda all worked out. He builds the walls and celebrates this 'early win' strategy with a great procession. Only a year or two after completing this exit strategy and the whole enterprise has collapsed. So he comes back to put the locals right again. Aren't we glad we've all learnt from that patronising approach! Before taking my present post I was Team Rector of Poplar at the Isle of Dogs. Margaret Thatcher brought in her very foreign developers to build the Canary Wharf Tower in my back garden. We mobilised the local voice as best we could, but as with Nehemiah they ran circles round us.

We have a new government now and the language is changing. Now it's all about 'Regeneration through Partnership.' But some of us will remember the same terms being used in 1969. Jim Callaghan was Home Secretary in the Labour Government.

He set up **Community Development Projects** to listen to the local deprived communities. But the Government soon shut them down, and why? Because the Projects began to analyse not the 'socially excluded' as the government had expected, but they were wanting to analyse the 'excluders'. So my first point is a theological one: reminiscent of Camera's plea: "when I feed the poor they call me a saint; when I ask why are they poor, they call me a communist." Will regeneration ever work if it **focuses only on the excluded** and not on the excluders and why they (or we) continue to exclude.

Second, let me say a word now about this **term 'Regeneration'**. The strength and weakness of the word is that it has such a **wide provenance**. It has spiritual roots in Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity, and New Age believers love it. Additionally, geneticists, urban planners and social Darwinists have all used the term. As with the malleable term 'social exclusion', so here, we can all get excited by it, but we all mean different things by it. The word 'regeneration' serves as an expression of very diverse hopes – and that can cause conflict. Third: how then is the term being used by this government? When the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) was initiated, regeneration was largely about buildings. Now it's all about **'joined-up thinking'**. No longer separating the economic from the physical, communal and institutional factors influencing a locality. It expects joined-up partnerships too, of all stake-holders, including Local Government (who were excluded during the Thatcher era)

Now in a rather revolutionary way, the community itself is brought to centre stage.

Key to the enterprise are proper consultation and the developing of the innate gifts of the indigenous community (or '**Capacity-building**') – something that the local Churches have been doing for years. But we must be careful here, for this could possibly imply that the real problem in poor areas is that they're full of individuals who are not re-generated – and could that mean that we believe them to be 'de-generate'? This reading is certainly reinforced in the 'Welfare to Work' programme, which rightly promotes individual opportunity rather than dependency. But will regenerating the individuals provide appropriate jobs in the market for them to fill?

Regeneration is a word which means being '**born again**'. But note that only the excluded are expected to be born again –not the perpetrators of their exclusion. (Barclays Bank has not been castigated by government for pulling out of rural and urban areas of deprivation, even though those who are excluded from work will lose their benefit if they do not retrain)

Alistair Darling, the government minister, refers to Regeneration as "**Fairness and Enterprise** going hand in hand." We certainly hope that this is the case and must do all in our power to make it so, but we also need to be on our guard.

For my fourth point, let's return to **the bible** for a moment. The early prophetic traditions used the word 'regeneration' to mean a return to **paradise** – wolves lying down with lambs. (Is11:6) This talk is dangerous in Britain, because we have no urban paradise to return to. We have always been rather bad at the urban. Architects and planners have loved drawing their plans and pictures, but they never wanted to live there. Most seem frightened of all that the Urban really is. Why else gated communities? Perhaps the nearest we've come to regeneration as re-capitulation, is in our urban **gentrification**. A nostalgic pretence at Edwardian gentlemanly values mingled with a hope of capturing the European tradition of bohemian ghettos for the intelligentsia. Trouble is, we've never had an intelligentsia either!

Later Biblical apocalyptic envisions the **New Jerusalem** coming out of the sky *de novo* and generating wealth and healing from within -rather than be parasitical upon its neighbours. New Labour, the first time for a British government, likewise goes beyond viewing the urban populace only in terms of their need and deprivation, but counts upon their gifts and indigenous enterprise too. This we must affirm.

A third use of the term in the bible is in its **baptismal theology** of regeneration. Here the baptised emerge from the waters of death as members of the Body of Christ. Those who were 'not my people' emerge as regenerated key players in the furtherance of the Reign of God. It is instructive to read of a similar process in **II Kings 7**. Four lepers are put outside the walls of the besieged city. So they venture out even further onto the margins by actually visiting the camp of the enemy – only to find out the truth, that the besieging army has fled. Death had lost its sting. They prove to be the salvation of the whole city because from the margin they could bring the truth to the centre of the community. The leprous poor can no longer be made marginal if there is to be healing for the whole Body. But to understand this calls for a new mindedness – **a metanoia** – for the whole community.

I think there is a possible new-mindedness evident in the regeneration-speak of New Labour. I say again that we must be wary, but they do talk less about 'Challenge' and more about 'partnership', 'listening' and 'community'. The **Home Office reports** (esp. PAT Reports 7 & 9) invite the 'faith communities' to participate. (see also now the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal document) They are dragging reluctant Churches in to 'The Re-generation Game'. And we *must* play our part. It is simply too important to leave to politicians.

But local Churches are often very **frightened of engagement**. First, they don't feel up to it. They don't have the expertise., nor are they *au fait* with the jargon And they know that their congregations, whilst being local are not always very effectual – although of late the degree of engagement has been steadily increasing. Second, they are fearful because the demands of the institutional Church are too heavy. We are an institution more at risk of collapse than in the past, so the pressure is on to concentrate on building up the Church – no time for urban regeneration. One of my best priests was accosted by one of his congregation: "I feel I've lost my parish priest and gained a social worker, and I don't like it." The local churches may be frightened but that's not an excuse for the Central Church bureaucracies to take over and disable everybody. **We must empower** our local congregations to engage in 'regeneration' - asking always two pointed questions:

- Will it prove to be "Good News for **the Poor**?"
- Will the Church be allowed to be involved in reshaping and improving the urban future without compromising **our integrity**?

Naming our Values and Causes

When participating in the processes of urban regeneration we must keep before us those **values and causes we espouse**, for our engagement must be a **Holy** participation. The values I share with you now are derived from Liberation Theology.

1. I believe that **full Salvation includes liberation**. This is signalled in the doctrine of **God's Kingdom or Reign**.

A: There is more to salvation than nice spiritual feelings, so political and social engagement is part of our missional duty. We must be there. But if salvation is freedom from captivity we must beware, for it is also easy to be captivated by politics. We can 'go native'.

B: Old models of engagement as individualistic & family pastoralia are not sufficient. We must get real for example about how Market Forces can both enhance or impede the wellbeing of God's children and their salvation. We must, in other words, be aware of sin as structural as well as individual and communal. A regeneration scheme in Newcastle included the building of a supermarket. There was lots of co-ordinated planning to benefit local shopkeepers. But as a consequence of all the interest, the local land-market attracted developers. The land price shot up and all the local shops could afford to leave and go to a new brown-field development. So the Locality did not benefit after all. Market forces can subvert salvation.

C: On the other hand, the regeneration and salvation of human community must mean more than simply economic regeneration. We must always cry out for that.

2. All theology and all faith is Contextual.

This is signalled in the doctrine of **Incarnation**.

A: Churches (especially the Church of England) boast that they are local and connected. But our congregations often concentrate on remaining aloof from their context, so we must be honest. On the other hand, many are very contextually alert and we should glory in that.

B: By changing the built environment we can change people. But in what way they will change we cannot always predict. If however, local people themselves are empowered to take hold of their environment, perhaps that can leave more room for Grace – - less engineering and more freedom.

C: For a project to be sustainable it must be integrated with the soul of the ongoing community, and also with environmental vulnerabilities. It is a question whether large or small regeneration projects are better able to be true to the heritage and wishes of the community.

D: The *talk* is about empowering the local. But whilst bids do reflect local issues, they are then tested against the priorities which central government has already set up, derived from their own philosophy. What can we do about our imperialism?

3. The Life of faith includes both Action and Reflection. ('Praxis')

This is signalled in the doctrine of **Church as Body of Christ**.

A: We must be a Jargon-busting Church. Elitist knowledge must not be used to dis-empower or impress local people. Just as there should be mutual engagement in action, so also there must be full partnership in information.

B: When it comes to community participation, the powerful have developed cultic ways of allowing local people to mouth-off their complaints and then pass decision-making back to themselves. But we must expect local people not only to give their opinions but their commitment, and their commitment must be welcomed by the powerful. In all this the church must learn to be a sensitive interpreter and builder of bridges.

4. Concern about power

This is signalled in the doctrine of the **Holy Trinity**.

A: Whilst mouthing the phrases of partnership, an SRB bid can still turn out to be the same old scramble for funds and power. The Local Authority, developers, voluntary organisations, the police, community groups, and the Church must all learn to give up their individual power for the welfare of the community, all working as equal partners.

B: Regeneration schemes are prone to focus so locally that the overview is missed. But the estate's problems are but a symptom of a whole issue, often shared at national or even global level. The power to change a situation may lie completely outside the catchment of the regeneration scheme, and the scheme may serve to take the community's eye off the real culprits.

5. **God's concern for the poor.**

This is signalled in the symbol of **Crucifixion**.

A: Those who earn their living by regenerating areas of deprivation and then spend their resulting salaries or wealth elsewhere are described by Americans as 'Poverty pimps'. The question must always be: "does this benefit the poor?"

B: We are right to stress that Regeneration means more than economic investment. But enhancing skills and offering community targets are anathema when they become an excuse for proper provision of resources.

C: The poor throughout history have been spatially coerced. That's why dreams of a Promised Land always go down well (viz. the success of Margaret Thatcher's 'Right to Buy' programme) The Church must be careful that the poor are not ripped-off by utopian sermons about Regeneration, be they preached by clergy or politicians. Dream dreams in order to achieve them for the poor, not merely to gain friends.

D: Sometimes the poor do not want to be partners with those they see as their oppressors. They may despise talk about the deprivation of their community and want to focus upon the good. Others will want to rage about injustice, or spite it through criminal behaviour. By requiring Partnership, the regenerators may be denying the full experience of the excluded. But not to include the people on their own terms is surely exclusion.

6. **Witnessing Spirituality.**

This is signalled in the symbol of **Eucharistic Presence**.

A: All that we have been saying will cost the Church. Engagement in regeneration does not always directly benefit the Church. But in spite of that we must engage in God's mission, not just our own.

B: Surrendering our power or supposed purity will be a compromise. But we must make partners of other faith or community groups if it is to benefit the poor.

C: We must create networks of hope. Living the alternatives as our witness. This will be our evangelism.

With these values to the fore, we would hope that our engagement in '**Ministry in the Context of Regeneration**' would be realistic, effectual and still holy.

+Laurie Green

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