

Town centre ministry
a distinctive expression of faith revealing the kingdom of God

Following a debate of the Board of Mission a small group of clergy met with the Director of Community Ministry to research the distinctive ministry offered to town centres. The research brief was agreed and the work conducted over a period of nine months. The report offers a theological understanding of town, evidence from the ground research, learning outcomes for parishes, boards and senior staff, conclusions for ministry in town centres.

Part 1

A theological understanding of town

'We need to think about where we are and what is special and unique about our surroundings so that we can better understand ourselves and how we relate to others'

Lyndon in Sheldrake

In most European countries the word for city and town is the same.

There is little published material specifically about town centre ministry. There is good reflection available about the theology of city but much of that focuses on a particular aspect of city, or urban theology such as the work place or poverty.

Traditional theology has separated town from country, country being the place where we meet with God, harking back to the biblical image of Eden and perpetuating an unhealthy myth of countryside escapism. Biblical teaching however moves from country encounter to a fulfilled kingdom in a city. In Jewish history encounters with God were on the whole through the context of towns. The wilderness experience was punctuated with encounters in towns and cities where God fought with or against his people. The exile placed people in Babylon and tasked them to bring about transformation of that place. The rebuilding of Jerusalem reflected the rebuilding of a community's relationship with God. The prophets centred their ministry on challenging the corruption and exploitation of towns people illustrating a corrupt and exploitive non-relationship with God.

While a lot of Jesus' ministry was located in the countryside people came out from towns and villages to hear him and returned to those places to live out a new found relationship with God. That would certainly be true of the story of Pentecost in Acts 2. Pauline churches were all established in towns and cities, places of new opportunity, and meeting places for all sorts of people. The early church reflected this mix through its people and its struggles. Restoration, redemption and transformation key theological and sociological themes for humanity come through encounters in an urban context through a community approach to living not an individual approach.

The growth of a town is a reflection on the development of a local community through demography, sociology and economics. Towns grew around the place where hunters, farmers, craftsmen and traders met. They became the news sharing places, the intersection between communities. They became the place where financial and legal transactions were agreed. It was in the town that people learnt to work together across differences of occupation, language, culture and relationships thus civil and civic society was born where a civilizing process took place.

Where communities prospered, towns emerged as places to foster that prospering and to encounter new opportunities. Strong communities built strong towns defending themselves and those dependent on them. There was a dynamic relationship between town and the surrounding environment to support living. Town's people being dependent on the local land for food for example. This is still true evidenced through the local market,

particular festivals, the cycle of shopping for particular goods. Today a town still has a relationship with the local environment which a city doesn't have being more dependent on global structures.

Towns have not always been successful places of restoration, redemption and transformation. Power struggles, and political and economic dominance cause rifts and damage growth. Towns are not isolated enclaves, there is a relationship of flows between town and country, town and town, town and city which is part of the dynamic inter-relationship that is humanity. This relationship is essential if all are to flourish and respected.

Every town has its own distinct identity created through its physicality, occupation, culture and story. This is particularly true of European towns built round the town square each with a distinctive product: wine, cheese, chocolate, meat for example. It is worth noting that the old English word 'bauen', (building) means to dwell, to remain, to stay in a place, and the root of the word 'neighbour' means to cherish and care for. Both concepts reflect a different way of living to that of new build areas. The well established town centre has the potential to generate a sense of dwelling and caring. The research evidenced requests for the town centre church to be more proactive and confident in its dwelling and caring. For the church these two themes resonate with hospitality and pastoral care in its widest sense and are at the heart of what it means to demonstrate 'church'.

The town is significant to the story of humanity, both its history and its present day story of 'how things are around here' God and people are co-creators of town. Historically towns provided places to live and opportunities for growth, they offered security, protection and continuity developing a safe model of behaviour through rules and norms and moral codes. Towns may no longer feel safe places. This is due to pedestrianization creating ghettos and dead spaces especially out of shopping hours. The lack of resident and commercial mix in planning does not build a sense of ownership. The sense of feeling unsafe in town is also a reflection of our lack of belonging. Towns have a significant role in helping us to understand ourselves, our relationship to humanity and our relationship to God therefore a theology of town should be central to the working out of faith and demonstrating signs of the kingdom.

Each town needs its distinctive flows of culture, occupations and activities if it is to hold a story and not be swallowed up by larger conurbations. The loss of such distinction is to the detriment of the people who live, work and play there and diminishes an understanding of God present in the bustle, cultural rubs and human struggle of daily living. Towns are a symbol of how we understand humanity and practice our daily living being as they are a close mix of work space, leisure space and living space, far more so than city where such spaces are often segregated. Towns are more likely than cities to be intimate places fostering stronger personal connections across cultures and occupations.

It is worth remembering that by 2025 it is estimated that between 60-75% of the world's population will live in urban environments. That figure does not include those who will travel into urban environments for work or leisure activities. Research by the BBC in 2000 showed over 1000 people a week leaving towns and cities to escape urban life because the urban experience hasn't provided the security and dwelling place associated with traditional towns. The urban promise of glamour with no commitment has not satisfied the deep longing and spiritual yearning which is associated with a need to belong. It is therefore right and timely that the church seriously considers its ministry offered in towns.

A distinctive ministry

Into this unique context of 'town' the town centre church offers buildings, space and people which have potential to create belonging and contribute to local identity through discovering and holding past and present story. Using the story of the place the town centre church can reflect and make real the Christian faith story. This offering is different to that of a rural or complex urban environment. The town environment is where both rural and urban define themselves and support each other, and where the ministry and mission of the church comes alive through political, economic and social structures.

A ministry of place: Church buildings

The church is a place where people can engage in dialogue and debate. A place for marking celebrations and festivals. A safe place for mourning, remembering celebration is not just about partying.

The church offers safe public place, in which people can discover their own sense of belonging and identity. 'It's my church.' The church place becomes a significant if subconscious marker in our daily landscape and in theological terms in our pilgrimage. Place specifies where we belong. Without a sense of place there is no centring of human spirit, people seek this placing through home, workplace, and safety in community.

The church building helps to define the town character and hold the town story as it grows. The building is likely to be used to mark specific occasions of local, national and international significance. It contributes to the town story through its heritage. The image of the church is of a sacred place created by sacred people and helping people to discover transcendence beyond themselves, to meet with the holy and divine. Churches are places which point to God through their architecture, activity and the people associated with them.

A ministry of space: Church space

Church offers true public space, not just corridors between places or places of service provision. The space provided by church is safe, it is not loaded with agenda from any particular organisation except that of the church seeking to provide hospitality, time and space for God to meet with his people and for people to meet with their God. The offering of church space to the town is an offering of safety where debate and dialogue can happen where it is ok to be cross or to express anger and frustration. Where we are allowed to cry as well as laugh, important points borne out in the research. Church is space in which people can express their deepest fears and joys, individually and together. It is a space where respect of God and the individual is held with deep conviction. Where burdens, struggles and fears can be laid down knowing that they are valued and somehow shared within a community of prayer, even if we find that hard to articulate. The church provides forgiving space preparing for restoration, redemption and transformation.

Having said that for many the church is an unsafe place. This discomfort is caused through two deeply held anxieties

 fear of what might be expected once the threshold is crossed
 feeling 'I am not good enough'

While both challenge the church about welcome, hospitality and building relationships where anxieties can be addressed, they also express a sense of value and respect for God. Both indicate that God will not be cheapened by those who carry such anxieties, who find church challenges their comfort zones. The church begins to address these anxieties through activities such as concerts and coffee shops, by providing good information inside the building and throughout the town, but primarily through its people who mix with others in the day to day activity of town life.

A ministry of presence: Church people

People are the church, not the building they happen to worship in at any particular time. The building is a really important feature of faith, an icon and a secure land mark, but it is people who create church. For that reason an understanding of town centre ministry is imperative for town centre churches. It is a ministry shared by all Christians in the town, not just those who choose to make the local church their regular place of worship. A vocation to town centre ministry will be a vocation that embraces change, culture, and contexts (business, leisure, education, residency). It is a vocation that models an understanding of the revealed kingdom of God and a demonstration of the presence of God in a microcosm of world community. A town centre community calls for a distinctive Christian ministry modelling sanctuary, celebration and presence through buildings and people.

The Town centre church has a dual role as a place for both public and private worship. As well as providing for the congregation the church contributes to the civic and civil life of the town through annual events and festivals. The church demonstrates the presence of a transcendent other among the ordinary and everyday existence of all people – God who is intimately involved in towns and uses the metaphor to proclaim the kingdom.

A Christian Theology of Place John Inge Ashgate 075463499x
Theology of the built environment Timothy Gorringer Cambridge 052189144
Spaces for the sacred Philip Sheldrake SCM 0334 028205
Living Together Church in Society 2005
Belonging and Identity report Church in Society unpublished

Part two

This part of the report is structured around the headings of the research brief

Research objectives

A number of guided visits were made to town centres lead by local clergy

A small group of clergy participated in discussion around the themes that arose

A questionnaire was circulated to all the town centre churches in the diocese, and through the church distributed to partner organisations including councils, public, private and voluntary organisations.

The results are in appendix 1

Outcomes of the research

1. Definition of a town centre

For the purposes of this report a town centre is defined as an urban area comprising: homes, leisure facilities including arts and sports, transport hubs, major shopping facilities, places of learning, (especially secondary schools of all types, and adult learning centres) essential public services, industry and commerce. It is populated by residents, workers, tourists. It will hold a specific history which contributes to the story of Kent. It will be geographically bounded by a mixture of roads, rail, sea and rural landscape. It may include areas of significant change, and face deep change itself due to the changing nature of Kent.

2. Current involvement in town centre ministry

A range of facilities offered by the church to the town including the use of the buildings, for social and learning activities as well as particular worship such as civic ceremonies.

Open space around the building often used as sanctuary space

Used as part of tourism and heritage facilities offered by the town

Church buildings are often although not always significant and valued land marks within the town

Some clergy offer a specific ministry through civic activities and chaplaincies.

3. Potential involvement in town centre ministry

Create greater links with town centre partnerships, local strategic partnerships, town centre management groups:

- Development of civic connections through festivals, activities in town halls, relationships with mayoral office
- Development of moral codes and norms through chaplaincy roles in a variety of work places, visitors to church buildings, heritage trails and among police where much good work is in evidence.

4. Relationship with town centre partners

The church needs to be more confident about its role and have clarity about how that is demonstrated within the life of the town centre.

- Proclaim faith principles in an appropriate way.
- Be more open and accessible, more willing to be involved within the life of the town
- Collaborate more with other churches and with town centre activities.
- Increase publicity of shared events and hold a visible presence of church at public events

5. Influence, trust and the expectations others have of, or place on the church

The church has a distinctive presence to offer beyond just the building.

Determine the relationship expected or desired by other town centre groups

Determine the relationship sought by individuals

Develop the vocation of Christians in the town, whether they worship in the town or use it for work/leisure

6. Emerging models of church in town centres

A church may develop a number of models most appropriate to the different demands of town centre ministry:

Pilgrimage model - developing a ministry around holy places (shrines) and holy encounters

Move from being place bound to being a place carrier – (you are church)

Minister model – to become the focus of worship and Christian presence in the town with all churches contributing effective town centre ministry together. Offer support to smaller worshipping communities.

Civic model - increasing a civic role as a mission tool

Prophetic model - particularly through partnership meetings and specific support to different marginalised groups

Pastoral model - through chaplaincy, heritage, hearing stories and connecting them to the faith story, holding healthy tradition.

Models that appear to be significant to town centre ministry are ones of sanctuary, celebration and presence

7. Learning outcomes for town centre churches, board of mission and other diocesan boards, Archbishop's Council, Senior staff.

i. Release resources that are appropriate to the ministry needs in town centres

People should not be over burdened to do more.

New ministry is not extra ministry, needs dedicated time and support, to match commitment that is offered.

Recognise many people are committed to effective models of town centre ministry
Identify local people with abilities to offer to such a ministry, providing training, providing release from other ministries they may have developed.
Create a wider understanding of vocation across town centre ministry

iii. Measure spiritual impact and growth

Impact is measured through a variety of ways, mainly relational, many subtle, but also through increased financial resource, greater use of the buildings, increased shared activities, particular requests for support, invitations to participate, evidence of faith integral to town centre development.

Effective impact will come through any number of ways so those involved need to be able to spot when and when it is revealed

Agree what you are measuring against – needs of the town, opportunities within the town, current and hoped for role of the church, how the building is used, how visitors are able to be pilgrims

iii. Financial implications

Regular facilitated support for those involved in town centre ministry to follow an agreed programme of study developing good practice.

Use mission initiatives fund to develop a diocesan town centre network which produces good practice and shares learning across the wider church including the potential to publish a resource.

Money available through town centre partnerships around delivering specific projects such as: social inclusion, crime reduction, work place chaplaincy

Conclusion

The priorities for town centre ministry

1. recognition that this is ministry in a particular context offered by both lay and ordained people. Therefore spend time discerning the ministry within a specific place, using for example models that have worked such as shrine, minster, cathedral, celebration and presence,
2. increase the strategic representation of faith groups, the Christian church where possible, on partnership boards. There is strong evidence from the research for this, finding ways in may be harder, but there are examples where it has worked effectively the Kent Partnership being one.
3. encourage town centre churches to be more confident about:
 - a) a physical presence and use of buildings including having people in the building when it is open, having effective signage around the building and through out the town.
 - b) a personal presence – the ways in which the leadership and congregation engage with the town releasing people to spend time being in church available to listen, building membership of town centre groups into the mission plan of the church and into job or task descriptions.
 - c) Affirm and encourage a whole church mission to engage with the restoration, redemption and transformation processThere was huge affirmation for this in the research matched with a desire for more.
4. work towards presenting a model or models of town centre ministry to the diocese through synod, particularly focusing on the learning and the theological basis for the ministry.

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