

# The 3<sup>rd</sup> UK Urban Mission Congress 2001

## “Jesus in the City – Success and Separation”

### Congress Report

#### Context

The setting for around 200 congress delegates from all branches of the Christian church and from cities the length and breadth of the UK to explore the theme of “Success and Separation” was Leeds and Bradford – two interlinked Yorkshire cities. Leeds is proud of its city centre development and the 24/7 character that it is developing, but for some that same development has created “no go” areas. Leeds is successful as a centre of finance, shopping and tourism but there are also many people living in areas which are among the poorest 10% of the UK population. There are large numbers of people from different ethnic backgrounds in Leeds and Bradford which as cities have a positive multicultural outlook, but over the summer there had been simmering discontent and riots in Bradford and Leeds which were connected to issues of race and poverty.

The congress also met in the context of the terrorist attack on the USA on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001 and the horror and anger and fear of what might happen flavoured the congress and all we did including our conversations with Muslim taxi drivers and our visits to local businesses.

Delegates came and went over the course of the congress – some stayed the whole time, others came for a day or two, but all came to take part in exploring what it meant to be the Christian church in the context of this kind of city, to reflect and to go back to our own contexts with challenges, new visions, shared concerns and networks of like-minded people.

#### Listening to delegates

Over the course of the Congress a small group of people was involved listening to what went on, listening to delegates’ issues, listening to the discussions and debates, listening to delegates’ ideas about the themes and issues raised by the Congress. Their task was to find out how delegates connected to the issues – whether it was theologically, socially or personally and what action would rise out of the Congress.

Over the congress they agitated and integrated and meditated to get to the nub of the Congress experience in order to make some sense of it all by the end to give delegates something to take away from the Congress. They also established a Listening Post, giving everyone the chance to air deep thoughts on the Congress – what was exciting, what was annoying, what was challenging, and what delegates were going to do about it. The result was a congress statement and a moving feedback session on Wednesday morning.

#### Keynote Addresses

Each evening of the Congress we heard a keynote address from speakers from different backgrounds and experiences – but all were people who are involved in the task of urban mission in some way.

- The Congress was opened on Saturday evening at a civic reception in Leeds Town Hall where we were welcomed by Councillor Atha on behalf of the Lord Mayor and city and by Bishop John Packer on behalf of the churches. After a buffet meal Bill Killgallon, a former lord mayor introduced us to Leeds with a personal and statistical view of the city. The facts and figures were impressive and well researched setting us firmly in context and his own insight made the numbers come to life. We saw a city proud of its heritage, keen to prosper, enthusiastic about its multicultural nature, but also struggling with the weight of poverty and social exclusion and trying to do something positive.
- Sunday evening’s session was addressed by Ken Leech, but in the context of a participative act of worship prepared by congress delegates including everything from clowns to prayers for the disinherited, from drama to artwork. Ken’s address challenged us to revision God in our cities. He used the example of St. Botolph, the patron of his East End of London church, to set the context. Botolph had founded his church outside the gates of medieval London as a place of prayer for the community and to care for travellers, he also took a great interest in drains and the physical conditions of the people. This was an agenda for us to follow – to pray and rediscover a sense of awe not just to deliver services; to care for travellers, refugees, the outsiders, and not to neglect people’s physical needs. Ken also challenged us to listen for God’s voice in judgement calling us to step out of Babylon into Zion.

- Monday evening followed a different pattern with a drama presentation by Jabbok, from Gipton, one of the estates in Leeds and a talk by Norman Hamilton from Belfast.

“The Climb” a drama written by the group took us through the life of Danny, a young man from Gipton – or any urban estate. Born in poverty with no expectations and little aspiration from his parents, failed by the education system, involved in crime and drug use. Who was there to help Danny out of the life that had happened to him? His parents, his friends, the teachers, the police, the church? None of them had answers that made sense in his life. Only an old woman with a rope to climb and a hope that God might help had something to give him. The drama asked many hard questions of our preconceived notions about what we are doing and why.

Norman Hamilton is a presbyterian minister in the Ardoyne area of Belfast (where there have been protests about the route to school Catholic schoolgirls take). Norman spoke from a commitment to an Evangelical faith with strong moral and biblical standards which he felt was vital to his ministry and gave him a certainty to answer the questions in people’s lives. He also warned us about making judgements at a distance about what is going on in his parish, and challenged us to work in a way that is people centred not reliant on programmes, to engage with the community and listen to the voices of the poor.

- On Tuesday evening we were addressed by Angela Sarkis of the Church of England’s Church Urban Fund. Angela spoke from the breadth of her experience through a number of real stories from different situations across England. Her stories challenged us to care in a holistic way, from the heart and from the head, and to build partnerships with others working for good in our communities and our country. She also spoke of changing the direction of our work so that instead of going to bring the Good News to the poor we go to share and to receive a blessing from the poor and disadvantaged. She spoke of working with community groups, and with local and national government to bring God’s kingdom, but of maintaining a prophetic voice and a radical agenda in all we do.

## **Church Visits**

An important part of the Congress was visiting local churches on the Sunday. Delegates were asked to visit a different tradition to their usual and there was a sense of adventure at the opportunity to see new ways of worship and an insight into different way of doing things. After worship, over lunch, there were some questions for delegates to ponder and reflect on in dialogue with local Christians about how what happens on Sunday morning fits in to the rest of the week, about the place of the church in the community and of the community in the church. Local hospitality was generous and warm and thanks are offered for all the lovely lunches and warm fellowship.

## **City Visits**

Monday was our day for visiting projects in Leeds and Bradford. Each group was allocated two contrasting visits in Leeds or Bradford and travelled as a group with a facilitator. The visits raised issues about success and separation and gave us more insight into the workings of the city. After the visits were over the groups returned and thought through what they experienced and learned from the day.

When the delegates returned there was a real buzz about the Congress. The visits gave us insights into worlds that we rarely are privileged to see. People talked at great length about the experiences they had and shared their own stories, meshing them together, making connections and discovering Jesus in the City.

Some of the responses heard were of the group who journeyed from a project caring for the powerless to the office of the powerful and a sense of anger that they were divided. Or the group who visited a multinational firm in a grand modern office where the staff were mourning the loss of over 350 colleagues in New York, they then visited a community centre serving a Muslim area where tensions were high because of the same event. The group who want church members who are shareholders in companies to be active at annual meetings. The realisation of the pressures people are under in work to meet targets. The shared concern between Christian people and people of no faith to see the community served well and people valued. The moment of prayer shared in the office of a company director. The interest of City Council staff in the leisure department in the work of the church for the first time. The blessings given and received by those who welcomed groups of delegates.

It made us think where God really is in Leeds and Bradford and in our own cities. Often people discovered that God was not in the expected places, but is definitely in our cities. A separate report is available on the findings of the visits with further questions for the churches and for the places we visited.

## Workshops

There was a wide range of workshops and seminars on Tuesday offering challenge and encouragement and new ideas for delegates' work and witness. Session topics ranged from worship to achieving justice; from prophesy to credit unions, from evangelism in non-book culture to children's spirituality. There were also arts sessions that had wonderfully creative results including some fascinating clay sculptures – expressions of success and separation. Another positive result of one of the Open House sessions is the decision of London delegates to try to have an urban congress for London to try to develop thinking on particular issues that face them. There is already a Scottish conference and network, could other nations/regions taking up the challenge to organise something and keep the process going?

In addition two programme alternatives were offered:

**Faith in Leeds – Retreat on the Streets:** was an opportunity to spend the day in a challenging and thought provoking retreat on the streets of Leeds organised by Faith in Leeds, a local project aimed at opening people to the reality of life on the streets with no resources. The challenge is to spend the day in prayer and thought, to take time to observe life at the sharp end not from a position of power, but of powerlessness.

**Leeds After Hours:** was an option after the main programme finished for delegates to experience a flavour of the 24/7 city of Leeds. Hosted by Revive, formed by people in their 20's and 30's to try to make church relevant to the real lives of people their own age as an offshoot from a local Baptist church, they have grown an alternative church in clubs pubs and on the city streets at night. On offer to delegates were hi-energy worship at the Hi-fi Club and a walk around the city centre and a chat about the city's night life.

## The outcome and the future

At the end of the Congress the Listening Group produced a statement for delegates that we hope will still be ringing in your ears and beating in your heart. It was a prophetic statement that declares what we discovered over the course of the Congress and sums up the message of the Congress and a call to our churches and our people to take that message and work with it to find Jesus in our own Cities.

### ***“Living with Jesus in the City”***

*“As we have come together in Leeds, we have met against the horrendous violence which has taken place in New York, Washington and Pittsburgh, the repercussions of which are still unknown as we leave. We know that our Lord looked at Jerusalem and he wept, saying “If only you knew today what is needed for peace!”. There has been much that we have shared that has caused us to weep for our cities, and the cities of the world, and to pray fervently for peace and reconciliation at this troubled time.*

*Jesus told stories, stories which got under people's skin, and challenged them to see things differently. In the stories and words of others over our time together, we have heard and seen signs of the upside-down Kingdom of God. If we came seeking easy answers we have not found them. but we have learnt that success and separation seem different to God from how the world measures them, and from how we are often tempted to do so. We thank God that he has continued to surprise us and to challenge our prejudices of where he is to be found. We thank God also for the ways that we have seen Jesus in transformed lives and living parables.*

*Many over these last days have worshipped in unfamiliar traditions and have journey to unlikely places. While much of what we have shared together has enriched our lives as urban Christians, we know that we have heard and witnessed things which have provoked, disturbed or even angered us. we ask for grace to live with that tension and to strive together for the unity which we know that Jesus longs for.*

*In the experience of Leeds, in the Word of God, and the stories and wisdom of others, we have heard sounds of our own cities and the prompting of the Spirit. We pray that these fresh insights, renewed vision and disturbing hope will remain with us as we now return to our city and seek to worship, serve and follow Jesus in it.”*

In addition a statement was prepared for release to the churches, community groups and the businesses we visited and as a general statement of what we wanted to say to the world at large.

***“To those who have ears...”***

*Around 200 Christians from many branches of the Church and from every corner of the UK have journeyed together in the cities of Leeds and Bradford over the last few days. We came to share with one another, but also to listen to the voices of these two cities, to look for evidence of Jesus in the City. This is what we have found and we offer our findings to whoever will listen.*

*We found that the gap between rich and poor is as evident here as it is in our own cities, as evident as it ever was and the signs are that this gap will continue.*

*And yet we were surprised and challenged to find evidence of the God of Love in every place we visited – with the poor and forgotten, the people on the edge, but also with the powerful and the rich, the people who turn the wheels of these cities.*

*We found evidence of the God we serve not only in the churches, but in the offices, community centres, and businesses of these cities. Not only with people who share our Christian faith, but with people of other faiths and people with no religious faith at all. We have discovered the God of Surprises who is not limited to our programmes and our expectations, but who calls Christian people to recognise and proclaim the Good News of Jesus to the city.*

*Very few of our delegates had ever been in the offices of directors of corporate businesses and public services and we were surprised and challenged by what we found. But we want to challenge the people we met to make the connection that we have made with the other side of their city.*

*We also visited and worshipped with a wide variety of churches throughout the city of Leeds – most of us to different traditions from our own and we have found again with joy and surprise that there is more to unite us in the task of loving the city than in what divides us.*

*We have had a sense of barriers being broken and steps being taken across shaky bridges which we want to strengthen. We have found doors opening both into the lives of the poor and dispossessed and the lives of the powerful and we have been humbled and honoured to share them both.*

*We have begun to meet as human beings in the presence of Jesus of the City and we challenge all who hear this call to continue to take those steps here in Leeds and Bradford or wherever they may continue the journey we have begun in these few short days.*

A summary of the group reports from the visits will be available soon with questions for the churches and the businesses and other groups we visited to consider,

We intend that the next UK Urban Mission Congress will take place in Glasgow in 2004. A planning group will start to meet soon.

***One delegate's reflection***

*You threw me into a new context, ripped open my vulnerability of fearfulness, loneliness, took away my control.*

*You forced me to trust innumerable people, innumerable pieces of information – people I will probably never see again.*

*You challenged me by your stories and contexts – by the city and people I've met – to share my own confusions and complexities. To admit that 'I don't know' in so many situations.*

*You inspired me by shared determination in places of work and faith communities to be a touching place.*

*You encouraged me in finding a community and concern and passion for all people, and in your shared commitment necessary to bring about change.*

*You've shown me God in the fun and laughter, the ridiculous and the serious, the worship, space, place – in moments of awe and times of pain.*

*You welcomed me the stranger in to your celebration of God in all places and showed me a little more of what it means to join the celebration of life – in an uncertain, scary and risky world.*

*Most of all I've received God's love and acceptance and value of the various groups I've been with and from my host through her hospitality of time, prayer, wisdom and effort. She said to me last night 'Sometimes we spend too much time concerned with how we feel about things; it is when we get on and do it that we begin to see the fruits.'*