

# Jesus in the City – Leeds 2001: Success and Separation Visits

## Introduction

A central part of the Urban Mission Congress has always been visiting the city and in Leeds we extended our visits from church and community projects as we had done in previous congresses to take in local businesses, visitor attractions, services and community groups run by secular and other faith groups. This sometimes gave us contrasting visits as groups went from a project working with the poorest and most excluded to the office of the director of a company with a multinational operation, or into a boardroom where policies were being made about the people they had just left. Other times the visits complemented each other as groups saw how the different businesses and projects worked for the benefit of their community perhaps from different starting points, but with similar ends in mind.

## The Report

Although all the groups took the process much further than a simple visit and engaged with the issues and the technique of critiquing their visits, the reports from these visits are diverse and differ greatly in content and structure. Therefore it is not the intention of this report to record the results of the visits, but to raise issues that emerge from their reports and to pose questions for the Churches, for companies, for community groups and for society with the hope that the Church and particularly those who took part in the Congress – either as delegates or as hosts – will take a lead in keeping these issues live and in brokering a dialogue with whoever necessary to enable further reflection.

## General points

The visits were more than guided tours and stirred much thought, emotion and thoughtful reflection. This was thanks to a very honest and open sharing by the people we visited and our thanks are due to them for all they gave to this process.

Visitors reported feeling excited, angry, compassionate, inspired, challenged to action, challenged to rethink their prejudices, shocked, and much more. As well as getting a flavour of the organisation they visited the groups often reported sharing on a personal level with their hosts and talking about issues that affect us as human beings at work, in the business environment, in serving the community and, poignantly in the aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, of the way to deal with tragedy, personal loss and the threat of war.

In cases where hosts were Christian there was a discussion about faith and sometimes a moment of shared prayer. The visits to projects working in the Muslim community also led to interesting and open dialogue about the place of faith in our society and for some on both sides was the first time of talking openly with members of the other faith.

In some of the visits there was a sense of separation between the business or organisation (and sometimes also the church group) visited and the community. Others wanted community involvement, but perhaps on their own terms, only a very few felt no need to make connections with the community. At the same time most of the companies and services felt that the churches are more connected to their own community and to the community as a whole and perhaps there is a role as go-between that needs to be built on and developed. The role of industrial chaplaincy was raised on a few occasions, but more often the need for churches to make links into local companies, services and community groups to work in partnership, to be advocates for the community, and to encourage community participation.

However, the fact that most of our delegates said they had often visited community projects and church groups, but had never been in corporate boardrooms, speaks volumes. The flip side of this was that while many of those visited talked of grappling with the ethical and pastoral issues that face them in their everyday work, few had ever heard any helpful teaching or guidance from the Church that had helped them face these issues – even those who were Christians.

The first recommendation of this report is to encourage a continuation of these visits, not only in Leeds but in all our cities, in order to build (or rebuild) the bridges between us and seek common guidance on the ethical and pastoral issues that face us all.

## Issues for all of us

1. **Success?** While our theme was *Success and Separation* several groups wondered if success or separation were appropriate terms as they found a mixture of both in each situation visited. In addition it is possible to define success and separation in different ways. One suggestion was to explore the notion of “shalom” or wholeness which is familiar to Christians and may offer a more helpful benchmark of our work for others. While whole books could be written on the subject the essence of it is that shalom is achieved when relationships are right – between people, in the community, with the environment, between provider and client, with suppliers, between nations, with God, and so on.

Achieving relationships that are just and holistic requires a strong notion of justice and a commitment to persevere with the relationship.

2. **Innovation, adaptability and openness.** A common theme running through many reports was how impressed delegates were by the capacity for innovation and adaptation – if there were to be a measure of success those who worked in this way were seen as the successful. Perhaps there was a realisation that the wheels of the Church are often slow to turn while other groups are quicker to find new solutions. In addition the Church often deals with its business in private and without public accountability. A number of groups also reported frustration, even anger at companies and public services that were slow to adapt to current needs, that had weighty structures or that kept themselves behind closed doors and did not feel the need to be accountable to the community.
3. **Inclusiveness, partnerships and ownership.** Delegates were made very aware of the need for partnership working between different companies, different service providers, different community groups and between churches and there was an admission that the Church has often not been very good at partnership working and sometimes approaches partnership with suspicion. Delegates also felt strongly that we ought to work inclusively – and to spread the net as wide as possible. This is partly to avoid splitting into sectors and avoid separation and partly to fully use the gifts and abilities of each group in the partnership and increase the effectiveness of the whole. This naturally raised questions of ownership of projects and buildings and the like. These issues will need to be worked out between partners in each instance.
4. **Leave our preconceptions behind.** One of the key insights delegates had was that most of the people involved in the projects and companies we visited were doing it from a genuine sense of wanting to see benefit to the community and individuals. In addition delegates found the people behind the directors' desks to be reasonably open and approachable and it appears that those visited found our delegates were not coming to judge or convert them, but to dialogue. Also when the dialogue involved people of other faiths in the community projects we visited we found more openness in both directions that our preconceptions prepared us for. Taking these first steps has opened doors that all of us have found easy to hide behind and we have discovered that actually "the other lot" are not quite as bad as we feared. Perhaps this opens the way to more dialogue in the future.
5. **People not programmes.** Comments were made about the way we extend our prejudices and preconceptions into the way we involve ourselves with the community. It was felt that it was important not to set the terms of our engagement with people beforehand, but to go with openness and be prepared to respond. If we want to help people in the community we should not go with the answers, but work together to discover solutions and respond to local needs rather than fulfil our desire to do good.. This is important when practical help is being given so that we do not give the help we think people need, but actually listen to their real needs. It is also important to respect people's dignity and to value them as human beings rather than simply recipients of charity. To emphasise the point one group paraphrased Jesus in Matthew 25: "I didn't have any furniture and you gave me your cast offs."
6. **Deepening the level of involvement.** Some groups raised the question of the level of involvement – it is no use being involved in the community or in charitable work if we are not there for the long haul and with the poorest people more than surface help is needed. It is all very well to give someone a good start, but what then?
7. **Buildings obscure the human face.** Business people expressed the view that church buildings were unapproachable and church people expressed the view that companies with big fancy offices were unapproachable, yet the meeting of human beings that went on in the visits transcended the setting. Perhaps we need to think more about the human face of our organisations and about the impressions our buildings give to people unused to them.
8. **Who do we serve?** Companies can spend all their time making money for shareholders and churches can spend all their time serving existing members – are we only in existence for those who have bought into our version of reality or can we serve others and take a full part in the community?

### Issues for the Church

1. **Prayer and faith should be our prime mover.** Several of the projects visited spoke of the role of people praying in getting their projects started and of faith being the motivation for involvement – not as a tool of evangelism – but as a response to people and to God. Behind all our community involvement there needs to be a sense that this is the work of the Kingdom and that prayer is at the heart of it.
2. **Where there is no vision...** Having a sense of vision for our work is important but so is breaking that vision down into SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and targeted) aims and objectives. Too often the churches have drifted into charitable or community work because we feel we ought to be

doing it, then lost the way. We need to learn the lessons that business has learned about focusing what we do but also be wary of simply adopting wholesale the styles, language and priorities of business.

3. **Incarnational involvement.** This is the reason for being focused – God was focused in sending Jesus to a real place in real time, we need to take our context seriously and not apply formulaic solutions inappropriately. We need to recognise the specifics of urban life and address ourselves to those rather than a church culture that doesn't necessarily fit. There needs to be thought about how we enable people to live as Christians in their own urban context rather than lifting people out of the situation or ignoring the situation. Several Christian business people also expressed their dismay that the church had never really spoken about their context and they longed for helpful teaching for them.
4. **Sell the experience!** Some groups were told by business people, “you have a good product, but you can't sell it.” The Church has forgotten how to communicate what we are about. For too long we have assumed that everyone knows what we do and what being a Christian *really* means. We must discover ways of getting our message across and of communicating what a Christian lifestyle might be. People are hungry for spiritual experience and we have an experience second to none, but the message is not clear.
5. **Church programmes are fragile.** Often delegates reported that the church projects they visited depended on a small number of people or that funding was a problem. There are issues here for those who fund projects – particularly with the poorest who have less chance of making money and there are issues for churches which are rich in people resources who might be encouraged to share them sensitively and appropriately with those who struggle.
6. **Partnerships are challenging.** Many churches and individual Christians express difficulties with working in partnership with people of other faiths or people of no faith. Sometimes Christians feel that their message is compromised in partnership. However, it was clear from the visits we made that the churches are often not able to go it alone and that this attitude serves to separate us from many who would work with us or who might otherwise come to us for help. We must address this fear if we are to be more effective and open ourselves to the possibilities that working with others is not only the way ahead, but might actually lead us to a better place than going it alone.
7. **Don't overload the faithful!** Some of the people we visited in business expressed a sense of guilt that they were not more involved in their own church as the pressures they are under at work are such that involvement in church activities is one straw too many. Being involved in church programmes could adversely affect family life. Sensitivity is needed on the part of church leaders to help Christian people with stressful jobs to be involved in the church in appropriate ways.
8. **Faithful servants.** Many of the communities visited were places of dereliction with boarded up houses and shops and very little else in the way of community facilities. However what was left were churches – sometimes a bit the worse for wear, but still hanging on in communities abandoned by most. This faithfulness in the face of dereliction is to be commended and applauded as an example to all of us who want to stand alongside the poorest in the community.

### Issues for Business

1. **Follow the leader.** Our delegates could not deny the obvious success of the companies visited and felt awed at the sense of vision and purpose that business people had who knew what the message was, knew how to sell it and how to make the most of a situation. The best examples of innovation and creativity were from business. We have much to learn.
2. **Is profit enough?** Companies would go bankrupt if they did not make a profit and none of our delegates would suggest that all business ought to be non-profit making. However, we want to question whether it is *enough* to make large profits for partners or shareholders and take no responsibility for the community or society in general. Most of the companies we visited did find ways to put back something into the community, but some did it on their own terms and others only dripped a token amount into a community fund. All of us make the community the way it is and so all of us individually and corporately must take responsibility for making the community better, not only for our members and shareholders, but for all.
3. **How committed are you?** Some companies are content to make a financial contribution or to give wastage, what is left over after their needs are met. Some have a short-term involvement with community projects or only get involved up to a certain level. We call you to deepen the level you are involved at and to come in for the long haul rather than the quick fix which satisfies the tax write-off. Responsibility means getting involved and following through donations to see that they have been effective and assessing what else could be done.
4. **Is being poor a problem for you?** In the fast world of business everyone wants to have a prestigious address and quality premises. In Leeds, as in most cities, we saw the zoning of the city into business

and shopping, educational and residential areas and the gentrification of the city centre. In effect this can exclude and separate the poor from these areas and create areas where they feel unwelcome. The flip-side is that ghettos of poverty are created in other parts of the city where even the moderately rich fear to go. However, while it is normally only the areas of the poor that end up being classified “no go areas”, the reality is that for the poor the areas of the rich are equally so. Is moving the problem really the best solution to poverty?

5. **Wealth of resources.** Most companies have a wealth of resources compared to most community projects and churches. Are there ways that these could be shared for the benefit of those in most need as well as for those who opt in or who are employees? What privileges could be extended to people in real need in the community? How could the skills and expertise that companies have be shared with community groups and individuals? (e.g. could financial advice be given to struggling groups, could the services of a secretary or word processor be made available to a community group applying for funding? etc).
6. **Control.** Who controls your company? How much control is in the hands of head office and how much locally? What might be realistically moved to local control under the principles of subsidiarity? How could the community have more involvement in you operation? What access does the public have to the way you run your business? If it is none what are you hiding from us? We don't want to break confidences, but would like to shop at, or bank with, or be represented by companies who are accountable in some way. Does local control include the hiring of local staff? How could your firm add to the skills bank of your community and directly affect social exclusion by employing and training local people. How about job-shares and New Deal and other ways to help people into employment?
7. **Mission Statements.** How helpful are they in making your company work? Are they simply a lofty ideal that doesn't really affect your customer relations? Are they a mask for the maximising of profit? Are they factors in excluding people even though they seem to be good in themselves? (e.g. to be a “World Class City” does Leeds need to get rid of the poor? for our company to be “Number 1” do we have to exclude large parts of the community from our business?).
8. **To Christians in business.** The churches have often failed you in their inability to link to the realities of your lives – you need to ask for more guidance, but we also want to challenge you to make the connections we made with the poorest people in the community and to see how your business might affect them. We want you to raise the ethical issues and to help us learn together how to deal with them.

### To Community Groups

1. **Community or Communities?** It is all too easy to focus in on sub-cultures whether they are ethnic, social or related to age, gender or interest. The Church is a place where barriers are meant to be broken down and we stand judged when we do not do this, but also want to challenge others to meet us half way on the bridges outside each of our comfort zones that we might explore our shared citizenship and work together.
2. **Individuals or community?** We need to be open to working with individuals, with groups and with society as a whole. It is too easy to meet individual needs and forget to challenge the system, or to work at changing structure and forget that people have individual needs too. How do you understand community and the place of the individual in community?
3. **Spiritual needs.** Secular groups must not forget that even though their project and aims are secular their clients may and in fact will express spiritual needs and desires. Faith communities may be more open to genuine partnership working than you fear – it is a lesson that we too are learning the other way!
4. **See above!** Some of the issues for churches and companies are also pertinent to other community groups

### Conclusion

These issues are offered as a starter for dialogue and action to continue the process begun at the UK Urban Mission Congress 2001 rather than as finished solutions. The issues raised will find echoes in different places and at different levels, some will not be relevant to one group, but vital to another. Many of the issues have been raised before or in other ways by other groups, however they are still valid as they are the product of a particular exercise of reflection by the delegates to Jesus in the City based on their experiences.

The scope of this report is wide-ranging because the visits were wide-ranging covering all manner of companies, organisations and projects. There are other issues from the reports – some very particular ones, but hopefully this report has drawn out most of the themes and repeated comments as well as some of the particular insights. *Manuscript copies of the reports and a full list of the visits and questions posed to delegates are available from Leeds Church Institute.*