

Church Times – a 2003 Book of the Year

"The best book on urban ministry I have ever read."

A review by the Rev'd Dr John Pridmore, Team Rector of Hackney, in east London

Urban Ministry and the Kingdom of God

By Bishop LAURIE GREEN

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Bishop Laurie Green grew up in the East End of London, though like many of his generation of East Enders he has ended up somewhere leafier. But throughout an acclaimed ministry he has remained true to his roots and obedient to the command — a recurring refrain on these telling pages — “stay in the city”.

We who minister in cities must do our theology properly. (“Doing theology”, “being Church” — it seems that the battle is now lost to be rid of these hideous expressions.) The methodology Bishop Laurie advocates is contextual theology. He insists that we understand its structure and the sequence of its operations. If in doubt, he tells us, we should keep checking the Contents page.

Contextual theology has four elements. We start with where we are, and how we came to be there. So Green begins with “the urban story”. In fact, he has several such stories to tell. There is the vivid story of his own East End boyhood, of work in a jellied-eel factory, of helping out in the market on his grandmother’s jewellery stall. There is the scriptural story, with its contrasting images of the city we seek for and the city, “weeping sore in the night”, which we must settle for.

Then we have the history of the cities we live in: the tale of how these vast, complex, cruel, and beautiful conurbations came about. A sub-plot to that story is the account of the Church’s attempts, always courageous if sometimes inept, to serve the city. Green sees church history as a procession of prophets. (Great characters they were, too: he recalls Ernie Southcott’s “enormous hands flapping”.)

The second phase of contextual theology is analytical — we must ask what we make of where we are. Today’s cities are very different places from what they were only ten or 20 years ago. The Church of England’s 1985 report *Faith in the City*, to which the Church has made only a partial and belated response, is already out of date. Laurie Green’s analysis of all that’s new about our contemporary urban experience is acute.

The picture he paints is certainly a true likeness of the inner-city I know, where the various ethnic groups are now far more assertive of their own identity, where developers exploit the process of gentrification, where gangs with guns have moved in on the drugs market, and where every other person on the bus is on the phone.

The next step is to reflect on analysed experience in the light of what Jesus said and did. Now we are on the “hermeneutic circle” with all its perils. For what we see in the Gospels — and what we miss — is determined by our vantage point.

Laurie Green highlights aspects of Galilean society which strike him: its ruthless commercialisation, the devastating impact of new food technologies, urban development at the price of rural impoverishment, and so on. What we find in the New Testament world is what we notice about our own. Green contends that the mission of Jesus, in his day, was to proclaim and inaugurate a radically alternative culture and community, that of the Kingdom of God. Surely it was, as surely it still is.

But our expectation of that kingdom is still shaped by experience. My sermons about the reign of God in Hackney owe as much to the exasperation and delight of living here as to the gospel sayings about the kingdom, the latter so laconic, so cryptic, so ironic.

The final step of contextual theology is programmatic: to ask what must now be done. Green has things to say at this late stage about the task of those ordained to urban ministry, and I for one am nourished by his wisdom. Much of what he says about our need of God and of one another is, no doubt, common sense, but, having heard it voiced with such gentleness, compassion and good humour, perhaps at last I'll take it to heart. Here is a bishop who does not hector.

I am equally grateful for his advice about our impossible buildings, the monstrosities that fuel in many of us thoughts of arson or suicide.

Just occasionally the Bishop seems out of touch. We don't have "quite a few weddings", not, at least, in the East End. We don't have any weddings. (I exaggerate slightly: I think we had one last year.) Nor are there "a hundred or so funerals" each year. For reasons best left to an investigative journalist to explore, funerals, too, are few and far between. And in this corner of the vineyard there is only the very rare sighting of a deacon.

But these are minor cavils about the best book on urban ministry I have ever read.