

New Zealand

Urban Ministry and the Kingdom of God

Laurie Green. London: SPCK, London, 2003. 192 pp. ISBN 0281055300. \$52.95

Writing for a church in an urban age, Bishop Laurie Green delivers reflection upon urban development and ministry in Britain. He offers a vision for a people in mission engaged in doing theology ‘where their feet are’. Simply, “this book calls the church to a renewed vocation for our urban mission today.” Although the context of this book is British, there is still much to be gained from the elucidation of the urban condition and the shape of urban theology (not least of which is an appreciation of history and a good section of further reading). Appreciation of this book will be greatest for the reader who is prepared to work at relating its insights to their own context.

There are theologians who claim to do contextual theology when, as Laurie Green reminds us in the preface, they are merely drawing abstract conclusions about their context. That’s the perennial difficulty of the academy. In a sense, Green has these people in mind; hoping perhaps that they might begin to be less preoccupied with their disembodied constructions, and recover instead the dangerous memory of why and theology is done. His hope, in other words, is that they might more fully realise that in theology there is no getting away from two fundamental questions: *where are we?* and *whose are we?* This is the primary datum of theology, and also of Green’s book.

Green draws upon the pastoral cycle (an implementation of the learning cycle) developed in his *Let’s Do Theology* for the structure of this book. He does this to good affect in ten concisely written chapters spread over four parts, focusing respectively upon *practice, analysis, reflection, and response*.

As well as offering a narrative which tells something of Green’s own story, Part One offers an engaging if somewhat brief survey of the place of the city in the story of the bible, examining “God’s pain and its rife injustices”. It goes on to include a multi-disciplinary and accessible discussion of the nature of what “urban” is and how it is formed. It concludes by telling the story of urban mission and offering reflections upon it: a tour of significant signposts and trends in thirteen pages.

Part Two offers critical analysis of the British context and the new urban features which have emerged in the last twenty years. Whilst imperative for the methodology of the book, I suppose some readers may feel this section is perhaps of less direct relevance to the reader in Aotearoa/New Zealand, although similarities and parallels can be traced with ease. Such is the local/global relationship of our experience in the minority world.

In Part Three we find Green “doing theology” by reflecting upon urban mission and the urban context in the light of the Jesus story which was itself contextual, and remains relevant. Thus, Green reflects upon context in the light of the Kingdom of God. Green identifies the Lord’s Prayer as that which helps to remind us to how to play our part in the Kingdom: “The prayer empowers our imaginations and keeps us true to the story of Jesus so that we, his disciples, can continue his mission in the power of the Spirit and to God’s glory.” Chapter 7 uses the Lord’s Prayer as a way of steering our reflection upon how we can be people of the Kingdom, using stories from Green’s experience and mining the resources of faith as challenge-in response.

Finally, it is in Part Four that Green responds with a Kingdom-based ministry and mission as a way forward for the people of God. Note that the emphasis is – refreshingly – upon the Kingdom, not church. Here, in particular, he reflects directly upon the need to remember where we come from and whose we are (“the need to pray, worship, and sink ourselves in the story of Jesus”), before moving on to the importance of community in urban ministry: “we cannot operate alone. In all we do we need friends – other disciples to be alongside, working... in critical solidarity with the community in which we are set.” The style of urban ministry is further teased out in subsequent chapters, which focus on things like the need for social analysis and building networks. Although his vision for the future, which uses his pastoral cycle, could have been fleshed out more fully, it remains well focused.

This volume is a positive contribution to a field that is, thankfully, gaining increased attention from publishers and theologians alike, and it is written by a leading theologian in the field. The rich and varied call of urban ministry and urban theology are imperatives for the future direction of theology – the urban and suburban are the dominant context in which the “missional church” will take shape and find expression. Green’s passion for the city is self evident.

His narrative and analysis is engaging, moving, and in places humorous, stimulating the reader on many levels. It is a work which reflects a faith and a wisdom born of experience and a sense of place, and reminds us of (or introduces us to) a highly effective model for urban ministry (practice, analysis, reflection, response). We need to be mindful of voices like Laurie Green, and – perhaps even more so – to those closer to home.

***Anthony Dancer** is Associate Vicar and Cathedral Missioner at Nelson Cathedral and can be contacted at anthony@nelsoncathedral.org.*