

ARCHBISHOP'S COMMISSION ON URBAN PRIORITY AREAS: A WORKING NOTE

[Originally prepared as a briefing paper for the Chairman of the Home Committee of the Board for Mission and Unity of the Church of England]

1. From Church to Society

Attention must be focussed on the social issues of urban priority areas rather than on the role of the local church. The local churches in depressed inner urban areas are themselves also victims of the wider social processes that create the problems. They do not have access to power to solve only to salve the presenting hurts in society.

Current priorities in the church's ministry in such areas, increasing resources for pastoral care and social action, ease the lot of a few, reduce the need to tackle the problem and lower social motivation to get at the roots of the issues concerned without actually changing the causal system operating. The result is that the church's role in the inner city sedates the system in the short-term while allowing the problems to intensify leading to further long-term degrade in the social system.

2. From Inner City to Total System

To narrow the field of investigation to the urban priority areas would be a fatal flaw in the terms of reference of the Commission. It may be a politically expedient ploy to pay attention to the presenting hurts of inner city life but such symptoms are the products of whole-system behaviour and cannot be treated in isolation from the total social system of the country within its historical and international context. Much current concentration on the problems of the inner city represents a displacement of the agenda in defence of powerful vested interests in other sectors of society.

3. From Symptoms to Causes

Current responses to inner city problems whether political or ecclesiastical are tending to treat the presenting symptoms as the agenda. The resulting policies and interventions attempt to deal with the presenting symptoms while leaving the underlying causal dynamics intact. Symptoms point to the real agenda, they are signs whose significance must be identified and interpreted if the fundamental agenda of social change leading to the long-term improvement in the health of urban society as a whole is to be achieved. The confusion of symptoms and causes generates an abortive flaw in any such process.

The church as a prophetic agency within society should ideally be in a position to tackle the causal agenda, to name the unnameable, to face the unfaceable within the social process. It would appear that other political, business and social institutions have such vested interests

in sustaining the dynamics of the status quo that they are rendered practically impotent to provide any effective solutions to the problems of inner urban deprivation. In practice the Church also appears caught in the same web of social collusion.

4. Long-term Perspective

While short time-scales may be appropriate for the ambulance work of caring for casualties within the inner city, it is essential that causal problem solving be geared to a much longer time-span than is currently compatible with the life-expectancy of any particular government. The centres of alienation and deprivation of our inner cities have built up over a period of more than a century. They will not disappear overnight. The system variables which have to be altered in order to reverse the trend appear to operate with long time bases. The church is one of the only social institutions capable of identifying and articulating these long-time-span goals of social system development, which transcend the temporary aims and the seductive popularity-seeking policies of political parties.

5. System Dynamics

To the social, political and economic examination of the problem must also be added the insights of social dynamics (one of the best known exponents is Jay W. Forrester whose work on Urban Dynamics was based on computer simulation of urban systems at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The implications of his work have been neither effectively challenged nor practically incorporated into policy making in this country).

6. Psycho-social Process

Beyond the field of the dynamics of complex social systems we must also take cognisance of the discipline of psycho-social analysis, to ignore which is to be deprived of one of the most potent tools of causal problem-solving which can be brought to bear on the issue.

As we press in to analyse the causes underlying the presenting problems of priority urban areas it would appear that we are looking at the outworking in social systems of some very basic and primitive processes, namely, splitting, idealisation, projection, and denial. One sector or sub-set of society is split off from another. Relationships across the boundary become polarised. Each sees the other as a threat, each uses the other to carry, by projection, those 'bad' parts of its own life which are repressed, denied and disowned. The result is the formation of black-spots, centres of alienation in society, used by the total system as a 'dump' for unwanted parts. The causal dynamics are then denied but guilt motivates humanitarian 'caring' interventions to look after the social victims or system-scapegoats. The task of such activity is to render the lot of the scapegoat more tolerable (to avoid insurrection), to absolve the social conscience (lest the system be overwhelmed by guilt), but to ensure that the centres of alienation are perpetuated in order to perform their vital, but unconscious, psychodynamic tasks within the system as a whole.

7. Outstanding Agenda

The fundamental agenda facing the Commission may well have to do with finding ways of modifying these psychotic social processes in such a way as to enhance long-term development towards health in the social system.

8. Caveat

Since these psycho-dynamic processes approximate very closely indeed to the core process of institutional religion, it may be very difficult for the Archbishop's Commission to penetrate this level of analysis or to present any effective proposals without alienating the church which commissioned its work.

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19th October, 1983

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