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- 4 Charles Wilson McCree, *George Wilson McCree: his life and work with extracts from his journals*, 1893 [hereafter CWM]. Passages quoted are on pages 31, 50, 62, 79, 83, 88, 95, 99, 103f, 131, 154f. His father preferred the spelling M'Cree.
- 5 G. W. M'Cree, *Twenty Years in St Giles*, (a sermon), 1868.
- 6 See their annual reports in Bloomsbury Chapel Year Books.
- 7 John Clifford, 'The Bishop of St Giles', *Bloomsbury Chapel Sunday School Magazine*, January 1893.
- 8 *Bloomsbury Chapel Year Book*, 1854.
- 9 Year Book 1865, pastoral letter. 10 Ibid.
- 11 No relation: author. For Mrs Ranyard's work see LNR [Ellen Ranyard], *The Missing Link*, 1859, and *London and Ten Years Work in it*, 1868.
- 12 Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, 2nd series, *Religious Influences*, vol.2, 1892, pp.169-205, esp.188-9.
- 13 I am indebted to the Pastor, J. B. Jones, for drawing my attention to - and lending me - C. W. McCree's book.
- 14 Carlile, op.cit., p.255, quoted in A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists*, 1947, p.240.
- 15 D. W. Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience*, 1982, p.37.
- 16 *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: an inquiry into the condition of the abject poor*, 1883, was taken up by W. T. Stead in the *Pall Mall Gazette* and became the symbol of concern about the poor.
- 17 G. W. M'Cree, *Twenty Years in St Giles*.
- 18 Quoted in CWM p.203. 19 *Church Times* 23.12.1892.

FAITH BOWERS, Member, Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church

COMPLETING THE CIRCLE

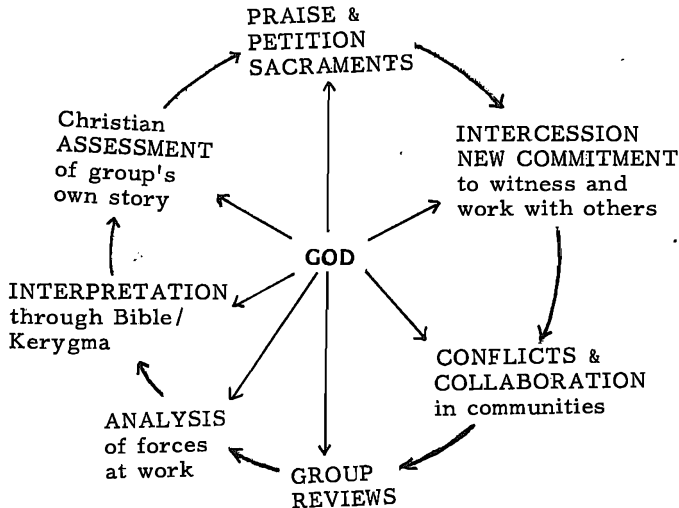
This is a sketch of some aspects of a Christian response within an inner city outside traditional church structures and without a church building. Salford Urban Mission (SUM) was set in inner Salford to discover in personal and corporate pilgrimage how God is at work to redeem and transform its communities, and what shape the Body of Christ should have in the midst of life in Salford. This interim review will try to show how we are learning from the inadequacy of initial answers to initial questions, and asking new questions which require new experimental responses.

Salford's boundaries penetrate to the very centre of the Greater Manchester conurbation and so contain a slice of the inner city that encircles its commercial core. It is mainly a poor white area in contrast to its bigger neighbour. Organised Christianity is on the defensive. With a large Irish population the Catholic Church is strongest but weaker than it was, the Anglicans are hanging on with many of their leaders living in the better-off parts and travelling back to their old parishes on Sundays. Nonconformists are in the worst state, and the last Baptist church closed thirty years ago. This explains why Salford Urban Mission was initially a Free Church initiative.

I am convinced that action and reflection, praying and living should be two sides of the same coin. This dynamic is often conceived as circular; but not many Christians are consciously trying to

'complete the circle' in their own lives. In Salford we were made starkly aware from the start of the great gulf between life and faith in both church-goers and non-church-goers; we saw it in ourselves. Salford seemed the right place to explore how people could be encouraged to do this naturally. I met people disillusioned with the traditional pattern but dissatisfied with their lives. They knew they were poor in that they had no power to choose how to shape their lives. This process of liberation needed to happen corporately as well as in solitariness. Traditional instinct in working class areas is to look to solidarity for support rather than to individual resources. So I began with this kind of model in my mind:

THE CIRCLE



God is in the centre, equally near to, equally at work in, all stages of the process; unrecognised in the world by those without faith, recognised and acknowledged among his people who live by faith. The *arrows* indicate that all ultimate meaning and purpose depends on His initiative - the Spirit at work in all relationships and transactions. This is a corporate model, concentrating on our activity in relations with others in the world. All individual activity has to be tested through its contribution to the whole, and all reflection assessed through its effect when communicated to others. Life is relationships, the way we discover ourselves and develop personally. We work most effectively for the world we want in the social groups to which we give our allegiance and in which we find our identity; we should capitalise on this in our mission. This may take the form of *collaboration or conflict*. We should not paper over the social cracks in our communities and deny as Christians that the most appropriate way forward is sometimes to face these seriously and honestly. It is here, in these natural networks, that Christ is found first. We work with him or against him. He is in the eyes and voices of those with whom we are bound up and in our reactions to them.

Usually we cannot see the significant features of what is happening: how our actions are shaped by and help to reshape social

forces, and how the Spirit has helped us. We need to *review* things frequently and it helps to do this with others. SUM has set out to find ways to encourage this to happen naturally. *Assessment* of how the Spirit has helped us, or of how disobedient we have been, is best done with Christians in similar circumstances or from a similar background. We need to ask in the light of faith: 'How has God been taking the initiative in our own stories?' If we can identify the key features, then their *interpretation* could come from setting alongside them 'resonant' Bible stories or Christian Kerygma - of incarnation, the Kingdom already here, the cross, love and mercy, judgment and healing, resurrection or apocalypse. This becomes the *proclamation of the Word* for us, the launchpad for *praise and repentance*, celebrated and symbolised supremely in the *Sacraments*. We then proceed naturally to *intercession* for those in our personal and social worlds, and *resolve* to be open to our God, who meets us back in the world and works through us to transform our society, so that it becomes more in line with His Kingdom. He gives us confidence through supportive groups, most intensely through explicit worship, and then through our commitment to one another - and to our allies - as we immerse ourselves in our work in the world. Such a pattern has emerged over the past five years.

CONFLICTS AND COLLABORATION

I began by meeting activists in tenant groups and community workers in community centres, and followed up contacts across the city in the networks to which they belonged. The emphasis has been not only on relating to people, but doing so through groups. For it was clear that the issues they considered most serious were ones they could best face corporately - forces and processes shaping their lives and leading to their feelings of poverty and powerlessness. This involved working with them not only in community centre activities but also out in the community. For instance, the tenants in one particularly run-down estate banded together to fight for repairs, and when the Council announced sweeping plans to sell off the heart of the estate to private developers, we worked with them to press for a revised plan. This saved more homes for rent for the 95% who could not afford to buy homes for which they had paid over twenty-five years. I was welcome as being clearly on their side, helped them organise their meetings, and advised them on how to respond to 'the system'. They developed confidence in working together for realistic targets. Working with them involves a constant struggle to be lovingly critical, and courageous when in conflict with the motives or methods of allies.

Crushing debt makes struggle for survival a way of life for these people. The cycle of poverty and the punitive state living allowances leave no reserves for unexpected bills or sudden expenses. Without earned income in perhaps nineteen out of twenty homes they cannot get cheap credit. Harassed by multiple debts, they commit themselves to a loan shark for a loan to pay off the loans. Not understanding the interest rates attached to credit cards, they are victims, like suburbia, of the politically encouraged 'credit boom'. So we are investing time in setting up in Salford at least two credit unions (neighbourhood cooperative banks owned and managed by the members). These are legally defined ways, popular in poor and well-off

countries elsewhere, for people to help themselves and keep what money they have in the local community. Credit Unions encourage thrift, made possible through small loans at a fraction of the bank rate. For many it is their first experience of the power of choice through having something put by. We establish collecting points at times and places where people naturally come together - in community centres, housing association offices, or churches. They also enable better-off churches to help without being patronising! A wave of them is being created in Greater Manchester.

Mission staff play active roles on the management committees of community centres, and participate fully in networks of activists and community workers agitating on such issues as health, health, employment, housing, volunteering and welfare rights. Young adults are encouraged to set up groups, for instance, for one-parent families or a club for able and slightly disabled local people. Through a self-determined programme of social activities people's lives are being enriched with new friendships and real support to face the tough problems of each day.

For two years we ran a holiday scheme, 'Camp Project Wales'. Two groups of 10-14 year olds camped for a week each in mid-Wales and enjoyed a range of sporting and artistic activities. Besides being an opportunity for the United Reformed Church nationally to train forty youth leaders, it developed local youth leaders in Salford.

REVIEWS

These youth leaders have now formed their own organisation and support a programme of Family Holidays. In 1988 they held weekends away for groups of families, encouraging them to plan for themselves. This chance to relax and enjoy fresh surroundings also led to some serious work on their lives. One night they came back from the pub and it happened! One man shared the problems of being widowed and alone, battling to bring up his little boy. The other parents, several of them also alone, responded without fault-finding but with sympathy and tact, giving support and encouragement, honestly sharing their own problems. A loving group was created and they returned to Salford with new-found friends. They have been left to dictate their own pace, with staff open to respond to any invitation to go deeper.

We who have the power of words and conceptual thinking that academic education gives, are powerless to transform society and bring in a new and juster world. Local people had to show us when and how we could help them. First we had to experience their strengths and explore what they had to teach us about their situation. Middle-class values and ways of life on their own lead to an impoverished view of human nature. We who come in from outside have everything to learn. Only thus have we the right to invite people to reflect on what they are doing.

We see repeated openings for developing reflection among those engaged in such activities in the community. We take every opportunity, formal and informal. It may be in one-to-one conversation, or at some point in the agenda of a community centre's management committee. We have on occasion been able to arrange an evening when a few will look back on a campaign or programme of activities and ask themselves what they have learned and what are their deepest motives. Several centres run by volunteers have organised 'think days' away from it all to face the hindrances within

and beyond themselves to collaborating in service to the community. Because we are alongside them, acting with them, and provoking them to articulate their motives and vision, they invite us to be honest about our Christian beliefs and reasons for being there.

ANALYSIS

SUM staff have a monthly reflection group with fellow professionals in the community who are Christian, meeting in each other's houses in a lunch-time. There is no set agenda, but we analyse the current scene and how we should respond: volunteers and professionalism, dealing with the Council, the use of power, the role of management committees. Then one of us will reflect on the theological aspects of these issues, add some Biblical passages which seem to throw significant perspectives on them, and feed this back to the group next time.

ASSESSMENT OR INTERPRETATION

This has been mainly among church-going Christians. There exists an enormous cultural gulf between Group Review and Christian Assessment. Our long-term hope is that people will get into the habit of reflecting only their common experience in the inner city, and also on their motives and the beliefs behind these. Can the quality of our presence alongside them in the midst of the daily struggle make them curious about our own motives and beliefs and wish to explore how our liberating God is at work? As a team we try to 'complete the circle' ourselves in team worship. Unless we are doing it, we cannot expect others to join us!

From the start we have encouraged basic action/reflection groups, deliberately ecumenical, for people in a few neighbouring streets, who meet monthly in each others' homes. There local Christians have found they can share their faith and relate it to their life, starting with what is uppermost in their minds. Other members have accepted their stories seriously and lovingly, and confirmed them as valid experiences. We end with ten minutes of open prayer, then the Lord's Prayer and the Grace. But when we come to prayer there is often a strange reluctance to pray about the social concerns we have been discussing; we still fall back on traditional themes like ill relatives! It is rare for someone to form a specific action plan as a result, but all testify that the group helps them have more spiritual confidence in facing life.

How can the Bible be introduced in this context? We find many church-goers not familiar enough with it, not imagining its testimony could be helpful alongside real situations in their own lives. They do not really believe that as God dealt with his people in Biblical history so he is dealing with them in their own. They will start with Biblical stories and try to pick out particular topical events which seem especially 'spiritual', but not take seriously that God has been relating to the whole of their lives. We tackle things vice versa. Looking at an inner city episode, everyone suggests a Biblical passage or themes which come to mind and are charted up. This has proved to be a creative and suggestive process.

PRAISE AND PETITION

From the beginning a monthly feature has been a strongly supported Agape meal. It started as a house communion service with a meal shared before the last prayers. Then Catholics joined us but could not participate. So now we start with the meal, breaking and sharing a piece of bread. Everyone relaxes and shares news, and then we give the Peace to each other. There may be a very short talk or discussion on a relevant theme before or after someone reads from the Bible or other books. The Leader may ask people to focus on a picture or poem or piece of music. After an act of thanksgiving we have an open session, sharing personal news or items of community concern in thanksgiving or concern or commitment. This is the natural climax of the sharing before our final prayers.

Recently we experimented with a Sunday afternoon service for friends uncomfortable with traditional services. Held monthly in a community or family centre, it was an informal mix of activities, prayers and songs with the right words, and successfully got people at ease talking and sharing. Once we each 'drew Salford' as we saw it. The results looked like junior school creations but the quality was unimportant. In explaining our pictures to one another we all talked freely about our feelings about the cataclysmic changes in the inner city over the last few years; this led to real, urgent prayers. Yet it proved difficult to attract those people who are most active with us in the community. People are reluctant to change their habits; many make family visits on a Sunday afternoon. Could we build Christian worship and reflection into the normal patterns of life, not as extra events? This autumn we have begun to eat an early evening meal together in each others' homes (when we would be eating anyway), with a simple act of worship - an Early Church practice! It is at least a chance for staff and their families to relax together and celebrate, and could be open to others to join in if they wish.

COMMITMENT

I try to complete the circle in my own life with an early morning meditation and a nightly comment in my journal. I find it helpful to augment this by sharing my day-to-day feelings with a long-standing friend and adviser outside my immediate situation.

INTERIM FINDINGS

We can point to SUM activities which take each stage of the circle as their starting point, but each covers only a small segment of the circle. Almost no-one is demonstrably 'completing the circle' in these groups. Individuals may or may not complete the circle privately, but even if they do it can only be a partial exercise. For spiritual wholeness we need to relate to a group, share with others in the same situation, and co-operate in exploring the resources of God. The gulf between faith and life remains. Many activists in the inner city refuse to review and reflect, to explore the real significance of what they are doing or their deepest motives. Some will review and analyse and learn lessons, but then plunge straight back into activity. Some church-goers will not relate their spirituality in private prayer or public worship to this activity and reflection, because they will not

put Christian teaching or Biblical testimony to a God active in the national history of His people alongside their own story, and so be able to assess in its light their main work in life. They will not naturally expect to find Christ back in the social struggle, and discover how to communicate there the Good News for the poor.

Not surprisingly, groups find it unnatural to concentrate on each stage of the circle in turn. People reject the formality of religion anyway! Maybe the realistic and natural way forward is to appreciate and capitalise on what is happening naturally, in each group activity which emerges, and encourage people to 'round out' their relationships by integrating informally as many of the elements of the circle as can naturally be introduced. We are still a long way from a people committed to practising corporately a spirituality for the inner city, and developing their own theology of how God will liberate our society and transform the principalities and powers of our day. But every difficulty is a growing pain, every struggle a learning point. The invitation needs to be always there. My hope is that at least a few in each group will respond to the invitation and take up the spiritual challenge.

One hopeful avenue to 'completing the circle' is to hold parties! After all, Jesus used parties as a sign of the Kingdom already here and a symbol of the Kingdom to come. At parties we tie up loose ends, correct misunderstandings, open up to one another and share deeper thoughts, rejoice in one another and in common causes, make plans for future action. They can create links often short-circuited in the fret of joint activity in community projects.

The truth and love of God is realised in relationships, and this is how we discover ourselves and develop personally. People in inner city communities know that instinctively; society needs to acknowledge their strengths to become wholesome, balanced and caring. We have a God who works and reveals himself only through relationships. The Church must realise that the Good News in Christ will be realised (made real) only at this level. We respond to Him in the midst of life in society and then articulate our experience of Him in praise and repentance in Christian worship. There He gives us the confidence and hope to go out to find and celebrate him in our actions with others, and so discover how to create a more just and human society.

KEITH ARGYLE *Member of staff team, Salford Urban Mission*

THE INNER CITY CHURCH IN A MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

In 1983 the authorities in New York City thought of a novel way of improving the image of the Bronx for commuters travelling on a major expressway. They spent a few hundred dollars painting windows with curtains on huge sheets of vinyl and then erected the whole facade on the front of derelict, though inhabited, housing apartments. Some similar cosmetic exercises have been taking place in this country too. It was the riots in the early 1980s that reminded us sharply of the serious issues going on in the city. Churches have been closing over