

Exile on Main Street?

Stephen Rand

Embracing action for community development and social justice ('seeking the welfare of the city') as a core component of the mission of the church is a foundation for effective local church life – but one that evangelicalism has seriously undermined for nearly one hundred years. The results are all too clear: largely ineffective evangelism and growing marginalisation within society. But the tide has turned – in both theology and practice.

We've seen it in our experience of Soul in the City in Wimbledon. Those in the church who got involved for one week in August 2004 simply couldn't leave the young people on the local estate without any contact for another year. So they went down on a Thursday evening and played football with them. A year later they did another week of concentrated activity on the estate – and at the end of it some of the young people indicated they wanted to become Christians.

When you get involved with people and build real relationships you can't just drop them – they have become real people, not just potential converts. And when you treat people with that kind of genuineness, they respond. If we insist on identifying two activities called evangelism and social action, then evangelism without social action is inadequate and less effective, because it doesn't represent the reality of God and encourage people to want to know God. When people see that we care, they can see that God cares; when they know that the church really loves people, they are more willing to believe that God might love them.

But then good social action must always have an evangelistic edge. People need the power of God in their lives; communities need the power of God in people if circumstances are to change. Money, projects, investment of time and resources all matter; there is also a spiritual dimension in which the resources of the Spirit of God are vital. The welfare of the city is a holistic concept – it incorporates physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual well-being: the *shalom* of God's kingdom.

If we have made this breakthrough in our understanding of the integral and integrated mission of the church, if we are determined to maintain the evangelistic cutting edge in our church and community projects, we still need to explore further how we can be prophetic in our action. If we need the gift of prophecy in our worship services, how much more do we need it when we engage with marginalised individuals and communities, when we engage with local and national power structures?

I came away from the Mainstream conference determined to be more open to using the gift of prophecy in the church – and we have seen the gift released much more among us directly as a result of the message of the conference being communicated to the congregation. It's been great. I am also still determined to try and maintain that same openness and discernment in weekday meetings – with government ministers, with colleagues – because God's authoritative word needs to be heard as much and more in those situations.

This raises significant questions about the role of the prophetic in community and society, not least in the context of exile. Nonconformity often responds to the doctrine of the 'gathered church' by viewing the external community as a place of hostility, so that evangelism is a matter of raiding parties sent out hoping to drag some people in. (As opposed to Anglicanism, where the parish tradition encourages a sense of

identity with the local community.) Part of the significance, therefore, of the instruction to 'seek the welfare of the city' from a position of exile is to remind us that isolationism in our communities is not the biblical option; rather, the challenge of church in community is to be 'in the world, but not of it.'

This raises genuine complexities when the church engages with community, and therefore with local and national power structures. The churches that have engaged with the realities of asylum seekers have had to face the realities of abuse of power and injustice, and therefore work through what it means to be prophetic in those circumstances. Just how awkward do you get? How much do you risk compromise of the project funding by speaking out – or compromise of the gospel by keeping quiet? Not an easy question. Sometimes our longing for acceptance and significance makes us happier being cosy with the powerful rather than challenging them.

All through Make Poverty History in 2005 there were accusations that the campaign was too close to the government, that it was being used by the government. In one sense it was used by the government – the very existence of Make Poverty History was a negotiation ploy used by the UK in hosting the G8: we must together do something about Africa because the British public are demanding it. The irony is that the government feel Make Poverty History did not give them enough credit for what had been achieved. I think the principle is simple – credit should be given where credit is due; but this does not mean shelving the obligation to point out where further action is needed.

One last thought. Most of our congregations are representing God in their community and in their workplace on a daily basis. How does church resource, support and equip them, as citizens of God's kingdom in exile, to seek the welfare of the city as part of the mission of the church?

This article draws on input and discussion at the Mainstream Conference 2006 seminar Prophetic Voice, Prophetic Lifestyle.
--

Stephen Rand gives most of his time to work with Jubilee Debt Campaign while also helping to lead Kairos, a Baptist church meeting in the Odeon Cinema in Wimbledon.