

re:Source Bristol as Luke 4-shaped mission

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Baptists are noted, perhaps more than others, for doing theology on the job. There is a lot to be said for this approach. For example, it keeps our theology earthed in the daily reality of the world around us, it encourages the whole church community to get involved in exploration of the Bible and it keeps us on our theological toes as we regularly face new challenges.

So, I want to do a little theology 'on the job' by offering some reflections on an urban mission project we are developing in Bristol in the light of the fourth chapter of Luke's gospel. The project is called **re:Source Bristol** which is introduced on our web-site as "*an exciting new urban ministry project developed by a group of Baptist Churches in Bristol*".

It has three main components:

- building the capacity of urban churches in Bristol to carry out creative ministry in their own communities
- providing ministry experience and training in diverse inner-city areas and large urban estates
- promoting partnerships between resource poor churches in urban areas and resource rich churches

Luke chapter four lays out some foundational understanding for the mission of Jesus which I find deeply challenging for our own mission and the development of **re:Source**. I will comment briefly on three points.

Firstly, Jesus' public ministry is preceded and characterised by a profound inner experience. Jesus, like Israel, is declared God's son (Exodus 4, Luke 4) – the question posed by the wilderness experience is "will you look like a son when under pressure?" In other words, is this sonship the genuine article or is the image only skin deep?

These wilderness challenges are centred around the temptation of *self* service; will I let ministry, vocation or profession define me? Will I let it become the source of my security and identity? As a congregation, will we allow ourselves to gain an influential name or reputation which will attract others to us?

These are extremely difficult questions to answer. However, I do believe that engaging in certain kinds of mission and ministry will bring us face to face with exactly these questions in our personal and congregational lives. **re:Source Bristol** is about engaging in partnership with other churches. In doing so we lay down the right to control what goes on – we will not get things all our own way; we are challenged to put the welfare and mission of another congregation before our own – we will have to take risks and pay for that which will have no visible benefit to our own congregation. I am sure that partnership will contain elements of wilderness where we will face some difficult and testing questions. However, my belief is that the Holy Spirit has led us this way and that the very act of entering into partnership with other congregations could be profoundly good for us if we have the courage to be honest with ourselves and God.

Secondly, I understand Jesus' mission mandate to be as much social and political as it is spiritual and personal (Luke 4:17-19). Good news to the poor and the declaration

of a new Jubilee is as much about societal transformation as personal transformation; and as much about life now as eternal life in the kingdom to come. Therefore as a Baptist community in Bristol, the call on our lives is to embrace the full scope of this mandate.

re:Source is a positive step to engage more fully in this kind of mission; let me illustrate with one example. Like many cities, Bristol is a divided community. On the one hand it enjoys the highest personal average income in the UK outside of London; on the other it has large areas of entrenched urban poverty which have remained stubbornly unchanged since WWII. Successive councils have been unable or unwilling to deal with the problems and as a result Bristol's education and health facilities are amongst the poorest in Britain.

Perhaps from our perspective, the most troubling thing is that this divide is actually embodied within our Baptist churches; to all intents and purposes we are not so different from the world. In communities and congregations there is an economic, social and geographical divide which is entirely contrary to 'Good News to the poor' and any declaration of Jubilee. **re:Source** is a very deliberate step to live out the gospel mandate in broader terms – it will have direct economic, social and geographical impact for individual Christians and congregations; finances will be given, people will get practically involved in social issues and they will visit, pray for and possibly move to areas of the city that are only names on a map at the moment. Compared to the size of the overall problem, we are taking small steps; our prayer however is that, as we take small (and 'prophetic'?) steps, God himself will act.

Thirdly, Jesus' announcement of the extent of his mission led to an attempt on his life even before his ministry had started (Luke 4:23-30). In retelling the stories of Elijah and Elisha, Jesus was declaring again the very reason for Israel's existence – that as God's covenant people they were to be a "blessing to *all* the families of the earth" (Gen 12:1-3). This theme is developed strongly in Luke and Acts as the *most marginalised* in society are repeatedly the focus of Jesus', and later the church's, ministry. Surely the call on our Baptist community is to be focused primarily on the margins of society, to pursue relationship with 'the other', to cross boundaries which are ethnic, religious, economic, and class orientated. **re:Source** is a practical attempt to engage the church more effectively in this kind of mission. It seeks to open up creative opportunities for local congregations to bring the 'blessing' of God to people groups in our city that we have no natural contact with – especially those who find themselves most marginalised in society.

We are on a steep learning curve; we feel in a rather vulnerable position; we are far from certain about outcomes. But we do sense that God has led us in this direction and appreciate your prayer and fellowship as we move forward.

For practical details about **re:Source Bristol**, including the years course in urban mission, please do look at the web-site: www.resourcebristol.org .