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WHY I CHOSE THE INNER CITY

By John Pearce

Of course it is now fashionable to work in the inner city for a few years at least, but it was not always so. I remember one parish in East London which was visited by twenty one prospective evangelical incumbents and all of them turned it down, many of them without even looking at the church building or meeting representatives of the local church. I know of another evangelical church which only three years ago was vacant for twenty months because no one would go. I wonder whether it is really much different today. If you want to fill a difficult parish ask an Anglo-Catholic to go and he will go like a shot (on the whole) but evangelicals are rather more choosy because curates want good vicars, who are presumably not to be found in the inner city, or prospective incumbents do not want to be type-cast as failures (for few people are really successful in these days in the urban deserts of our land).

THE NEED

So we went because there was a need and we knew that all too few would be interested in continuing a great evangelical tradition in a 'difficult parish'. Of course it was easier for us for we already had twenty-six years of experience behind us, twenty-six years of tears but also of much joy, years when, without any kind of success story or vast congregation, we had seen many people come into a saving faith and go on to maturity and often to full-time Christian service. We knew that it was not as bad as it is sometimes made out to be. We knew more than that. We knew that service in the Inner City is one of the most exciting and rewarding works that a couple and a family can be given.

GREAT OPPORTUNITIES

Why is it so rewarding and exciting? Why did a friend of mine tell me that I was going to 'the glory land'? First of all, there is the welcome which the minister receives from the Christian folk in a place like East London. We all like to be loved and cared for and that is precisely how folk treat their minister in the inner city. Secondly there is the chance to attempt to crack a problem which has never been cracked by the Church of England ever since the Industrial Revolution. For the fact of the matter is that the Established church has never won the folk who live in the inner cities and it is high time that we put every effort into seeking out how that job may be done. Why is it that the C. of E. is by and large the church of the middle and upper classes? What is wrong? We need to bend our minds to solving that great question. And, to do this, we do not so much need resources from the Urban Church fund to meet what are called 'social problems' as the manpower to bring rigorous and disciplined minds to work on the sociological and spiritual barriers which remain to prevent this greatest of all evangelistic tasks which lies upon our doorstep. It is this great challenge which has sent me back to the Inner City – and Angela, my deacon wife, with me. (She has been in the Inner City without interruption since 1963, for she is the head of R.E. and Chaplain of an inner city church comprehensive school).

But in spite of all these years of learning and effort, we do not yet know the secret and that secret has to be found – not just for East London or England but for the inner cities of the world which, broadly speaking, remain impervious to the gospel in every city, world wide. Why is it that He whom 'the common people heard gladly' cannot apparently now be heard amidst the clamour of the city? That question needs to be answered.

ENDLESS VARIETY

Thirdly, we have chosen the inner city again because it is a rich place to live. It is really true that

'all human life is there'. From the homeless beggar to the new immigrant from Bangladesh; from the white East-Enders with three or five generations behind him in his 'manor' to the black East-Enders who are already learning to speak of Hackney as home rather than Barbados; from the teachers and social workers who have made their home where their work is to the gangleader who would never attack the clergy but might 'nick' the lead off the church roof during evening service; all these are part of the fascinating tableau which makes up the inner city. But most of all it is true that, for us, God has called. Can it really be that he calls so few?

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