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Scripture Union International

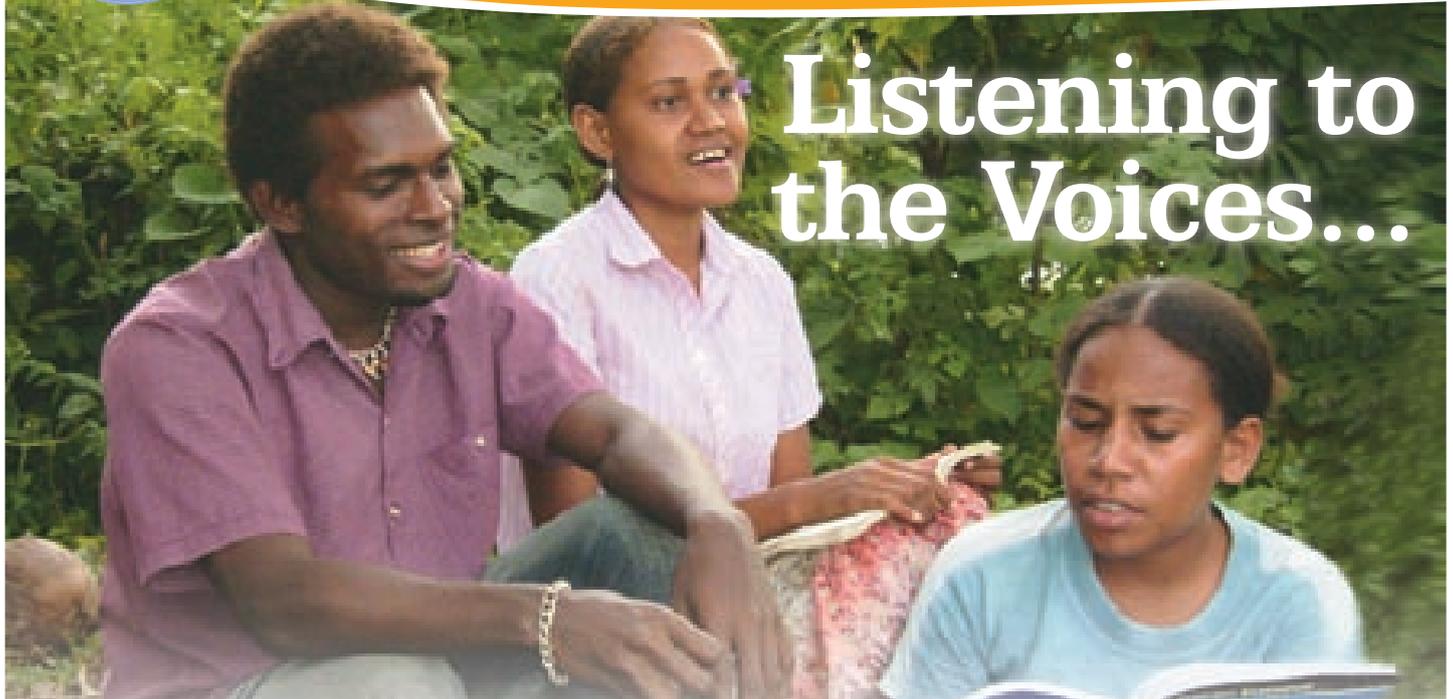
Ligue pour la Lecture de la Bible

Catalyst

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ISSUE 5

Listening to the Voices...

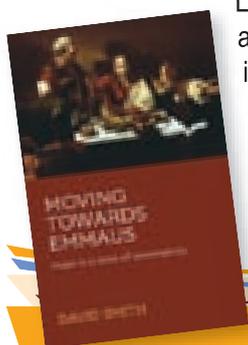


From the Ministry Coordinators

A head teacher called me and said, 'Could you please help to train our children to understand that if a parent is sick with AIDS, he or she may die, even if we have prayed? Someone told one of my students just to claim healing. Now both her parents have died and with so much sorrow she came and poured out her story and then ran out of school.'

What goes on in us as we listen to these voices from Uganda and their equivalents in our own context? The voice of the head teacher, urgently seeking support? The voice of the child in whose experience the devastating reality doesn't match what people have told her to expect from God? The voice of those who read Scripture with their own agenda? Have we learned to listen deeply enough before we rush in with 'answers'?

Luke 24 is a text that asks us to listen to others in the way that Jesus listened to Cleopas and his companion on the Emmaus road. It is a key text for the SU



movement and others whose mission is to help people to engage with God's Word. In October this year Luke 24 will frame a meeting to be held in Malaysia under the auspices of the Forum of Bible Agencies International. The *Hearts Burning* conference will draw people together to explore the four 'movements' of the Emmaus story and how they can shape our ways of interacting with Scripture. Please see further details on page 8.

Dr David Smith has encouraged us to look deeply into this text through his conference addresses and his book, *Moving Towards Emmaus*. At LSDC in 2008 he focused especially on the need to be alert to the voices of our contexts. This edition of *Catalyst* offers an edited version of his talks and provides some stories from around the SU world that can help us to look at our listening skills. We hope you will find it helpful.

We are experimenting with a shorter version of *Catalyst* in Issue 5, and we hope this will encourage more people to read and interact with formative thinking about Bible and mission.

As always, we welcome feedback!

Clayton Fergie, Pauline Hoggarth, Wendy Strachan

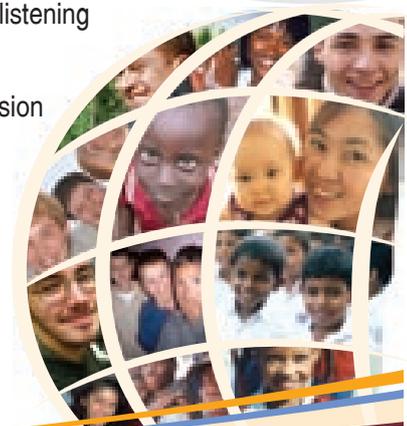
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Connecting with



David Smith has kindly allowed us to publish a shortened version of the talks he gave at LSDC 2008. This is a pale reflection of what we heard as David communicated with passion, compassion and humour, drawing on visual images and responding thoughtfully to participants' comments and questions. But we believe it can encourage us to ask how closely we follow Jesus in forging deep connections with the people around us. If you would like a copy of David's memorable examples of secular, religious and urban voices, available in English, French, Spanish and Russian, please write to catalyst@su-international.org. We can also provide audio files of these talks. (Throughout this article, 'Emmaus' refers to Dr Smith's book, *Moving Towards Emmaus: Hope in a Time of Uncertainty*, SPCK 2007.)

We should be wary about classifying people as 'secular', 'religious' or 'urban' as we are doing here. People are complex; their identity can't be described in a single word. And we need to treat the word 'connecting' with some care. We 'connect' an electrical appliance with a source of power when we plug it into a socket – but this is a mechanical action with automatic results. Authentic witness to Jesus should never be impersonal and its results are not automatic. This is what I have tried to suggest in *Emmaus* concerning the need for a 'revolutionary transformation' in Christian witness in our world:

- Can we learn from Jesus *how to listen* to people?
- Can we imitate him in *simply being present with people*, accompanying them?
- Can we demonstrate that Christ makes those who follow him *more, not less, human*?

Connecting with Secular People

With these provisos, we can probe some of the specific issues that shape the lives and thought of people we may describe as 'secular'. In *Emmaus* I suggest that the two disciples of Luke 24 face a great crisis of faith caused by the death of Jesus: they are *broken people* retreating from the terrible event that has shattered their faith in God and his Messiah and left them facing

a future without horizons. I suggest that 'secularism' – the rejection of what is transcendent and eternal – is almost always the result of some such crisis.

- It may be a profound *personal crisis* – an experience that calls into question what a person has believed so far in life.
- It may be an event in *history* that leaves an entire generation of people asking questions about what had previously been taken for granted. A European example would be the First World War, that left survivors traumatized by what they had experienced. Consider the continuing impact on people of today's conflicts and natural disasters.

Listening after the fires...

In February, bushfires swept through the Australian state of Victoria. David Tolputt, SU Victoria State Director, wrote on February 9:



I must confess to feeling numb. The appalling loss of life and injuries, the devastation of

the local communities and raw grief of those left behind is deeply distressing to watch. Please ask for prayer for those who are missing or have lost loved ones, and for those (including the SU team) who work to respond to the trauma experienced by families and young people. Later he wrote, Kylie and Hannah [SU staff] have been working in the school and relief centre. Both are quite distressed. Both have lost friends. They say that the kids are dazed and trying to figure out who is missing. Kylie is meeting with local council youth workers to try to organise for SU to set up a youth 'space' in Whittlesea where kids can hang out and meet.



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Today's People

Connecting with 'secular' people means taking the time genuinely to listen to them. What are the sources of their pain and unbelief? Why has faith become incredible for them? We will discover that some reasons for the rejection of God come up fairly frequently.

Intellectual issues

You may be familiar with Richard Dawkins' attacks on belief in God in books like *The God Delusion*. This bestseller has convinced some people that faith is impossible for anyone with real intelligence. In the UK in the nineteenth century the rise of science created a great crisis of faith for an entire generation. Believing parents of those who lost faith could not understand their own children! They continued



We asked Dave to share his thoughts as he has sought to lead SU's response to the tragedy:

The recent bushfires in Victoria produced a flurry of activity in the days immediately following. It seemed that everyone had something to offer and wanted to help. The scarcest commodity in an emergency is time to reflect and pray! Disasters like this need urgent practical response. People have lost family, money, home, clothing – even identity. In the immediate aftermath of the devastating fires, the community has rallied round and people have taken charge. But in the long-term recovery phase, we will need a different approach. Listening to those who have suffered will be crucial. There must be no glib, 'God loves you, and has a plan for your life.' Such a response can further strip people of dignity and strength. We know that God is already at work among the communities. If we can resist the urge to flood people with prepackaged responses, and recognise that rebuilding and recovery is best done within the communities themselves, we will truly serve them well. Does this mean that we don't offer to help? Not at all. But it does mean that we need to love God enough to trust him and listen to him in these events. And we need to love people enough to respect and listen to them. This is an authentically incarnational response.

Lamentations for today



In 2004 at an SU England and Wales *Encounter with God* conference, Pauline Hoggarth focused on the book of Lamentations with a group of experienced adult Bible readers. At first people were reluctant to engage with such a 'negative' text. Over the course of three days they slowly came round, as they listened to a superb audio version of Lamentations, considered the book's background, purpose and intricate structure, explored it through images, listened to it set to music and responded to it as 'their' word for today in drama, prayer, written reflections and art. One quiet member of the group asked for paper and paints and produced this image of a dark, burned valley and tree. In all the gloom a few green shoots flourish and speak of hope ('But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases...' Lam 3:21,22 – the words at the heart of the book). By the end of the conference people were talking about Lamentations as a key Bible text for today.



In our work of encouraging people to interact with God's word, especially in situations of darkness and pain, do we draw on texts like Lamentations and the more sombre psalms, on the 'complaints' of Naomi and Jeremiah? And do we offer people a range of ways of expressing their responses? Is this also how we listen to people and what is happening in their lives?

defending Christianity without realizing that *the issues were now different*. This created great tension between the generations and much pain in devout families. The lessons we can learn from this period are that (i) we must listen to people and really know what their questions are; and (ii) we must ask whether what we *thought* the Bible taught is actually what it says.

Ethical issues

These are, I believe, even more significant. 'Hard secularists' like Richard Dawkins are relatively few; far more common are people for whom loss of faith is a tragedy. The French philosopher Albert Camus talks about 'Protest Atheism', a rejection of God that arises from the





Voices from Nigeria

Yomi Oladeji, General Director of SU Nigeria invites us to listen with him. From southern Nigeria where Christianity is the dominant faith, perhaps even the kind of 'Christendom' religion of which David Smith speaks, Yomi writes, 'There seem to be many moralists in the church but we need more believers.' He suggests some approaches to combat superficial Christianity.



Our youngest daughter Deborah, now ten, begs us to tell her stories. If we exhaust our supply, she will invent one of her own. Whenever we have guests we seize the opportunity to ask them for the stories of their lives. In our family devotions, we often share stories of God at work today. These build our faith and the faith of our children. Recently I've been listening to readers of our Bible Guides. They tell me that they would like to read real-life stories in our publications. I find myself reflecting that our faith is based on God's Genesis-to-Revelation story that has power to change the whole world.

What about the story of God's transformation of Africa through the gospel? A granddaughter of Bishop A B Akinyele (1875–1968) once came to the SU office looking for the story of her grandfather. I helped her find the book, *The Beloved Bishop* by Adebisi Bayo. It tells how God's word brought change in one person and to Nigeria. Could references to a story like this be relevant in SU Bible Guides? The story of God's transformation of Africa in the past might then be one of God's tools to transform the Africa of today.

In July 2008, I visited a Youth Camp in Port Harcourt and spoke to the young people: 'I think some of you perhaps regret ever coming into the world.' So many responded that I needed to ask two other SU staff to help in the counselling sessions that followed, as the campers shared their stories. Some had been sexually abused; others were victims of broken homes; some needed to be delivered from involvement in the occult and some needed divine intervention in their education. God's story of transforming power can rewrite the stories of these young people. Could we sensitively re-tell them in our Bible Guides to encourage others?

What about the contemporary stories that our children and youth are reading – the good and bad news in our media, the stories of good and bad people? What about African literature - books like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*? What might be authentic African Christian responses to them? How can we draw on them to illustrate our Bible notes? Can they help us to understand why Jesus so often told parables? In the West, people often drive home a point by referring to a movie. Africans - especially my Yoruba tribe - do the same with proverbs. Why not use more proverbs in our publications to help people to interact with and understand Scripture?

Who is writing Africa's 'contemporary gospel', the timeless Good News of Jesus Christ, presented in a way that intersects with and transforms the everyday lives of children, young people and adults? And *how* do we write this 'contemporary gospel'? If we could make changes in our Bible Guides, in dependence on the Holy Spirit, by listening to these voices, drawing on all these kinds of stories and showing clearly how they relate to God's story, our publications could help to change the story of Africa.

suffering of the world. In particular, the suffering of children has seemed to many sensitive people to be a scandal they could not reconcile with faith in a loving God. This is a reluctant secularism, and people who take this position are often fully aware of the terrible dangers of a society that denies God! How do we come alongside such people?

A key question arises here for SU: how do we read the Bible in relation to the question of suffering? I believe we have ignored crucial aspects of our own biblical tradition. There are two areas to stress: (i) we need to listen to the language of pain, lament and questioning within Scripture; and (ii) we have to ask whether our understanding of the nature of God is really a biblical one? Is the God of the Bible the wholly Other who controls and manages everything? If so, how are we to understand this God in the light of the agonies of the world? Or is the God revealed through the prophets and poets, and supremely through the incarnate and crucified Jesus Christ, actually a God who knows the experience of weakness - a weeping God who enters into our pain?

The stumbling block of the church and its failings

We can think about this at a broad, historical level, or at a more personal level. With regard to the former, it is argued that the entire process of secularisation in Europe is connected to the Wars of Religion (the period of conflict, mainly between French Catholics and Protestant Huguenots, from 1562–98), and that the abuse of power by Christians led to a massive reaction. At the personal level, if we listen, for example, to Kosuke Koyama (Japanese theologian and biblical scholar), we find him suggesting that Christianity in Asia has simply not listened to people! Nevertheless, there is growing evidence of a renewed spiritual quest among

supposedly secular people. The atheist philosopher A C Grayling has written of 'the lingering splinter in the mind...a sense of yearning for the absolute.'

Connecting With Religious People

There are likely to be significant differences, even within the worldwide SU movement, about the way Christians 'connect' with people of other faiths. Christians from the Western world have, until recently, been used to living in cultures in which Christianity has been the dominant religion. We have lived within 'Christendom' – a culture that made Christian belief central to peoples' identity. Whether that was good or bad is open to discussion. The French Christian philosopher and theologian Jacques Ellul said that, 'Christendom destroyed Christianity by making us all Christians.' He meant that Christianity became a *cultural* faith and those who identified themselves as Christians had very little contact with people believing differently. For hundreds of years Christianity existed within a kind of sealed area. Contact with ancient faiths like Hinduism and Buddhism was rare. The only regular encounter with people of other religions within Europe was with Jews and Muslims – and both these contacts were tragic. The history of the Crusades and of the *Conquistadores* in South America illustrate how mission took the form of expanding power and control. This left the Western church unable to undertake mission and with no theology to prepare it for the meeting with other faiths.

By contrast, Christians elsewhere in the world have often found themselves a minority among other faiths. In this case the question of 'how to connect' hardly arises because this is simply the way life is. We must work out how to relate to our Muslim or Hindu neighbours. The challenge of 'connecting' may therefore look very different. We need to recognise our contrasting histories and locations and listen to and learn from each other.

What about today?

Western Christians still have what I call a 'Christendom hangover': they are ashamed of the enforced conversions of the past, but a sense of superiority and an inability to listen to other people still exist. It is one thing to reject crusading, but another to eliminate a crusading mentality; the latter still exists in much preaching and in many hymns.

Nevertheless, in recent decades the world has changed beyond recognition. It is simply no longer



Ugandan school children listen to FCBH audio scripture

Research can help us listen!

SU USA partners with the *American Bible Society* to develop research tools to shape their joint strategy for helping people develop a Bible reading habit.

SU Uganda is partnering with *Faith Comes By Hearing*, *Metadigm* and *SU International* in a research project to evaluate the impact of audio Scripture in school groups throughout the country.

SU in Queensland Australia is piloting a new Discipleship resource for 11–13 year olds. It began with intentional listening to people at three levels: to young adults as they recollect their own stories of discipleship; to adults who are mentors of children, and most importantly to children as they follow Jesus in everyday life.



true that 'East is East and West is West' because we have witnessed the greatest shift of population in human history. The result is that cities that were once largely monocultural have become radically plural. What this means is that...

- connecting with people of other faiths becomes crucially important;
- Christians must discover a way of mission that is credible in a pluralistic world;
- the early church, *before* Christendom, may have much to teach us today. How did *they* do it?

Let me suggest four principles of Christian engagement with people of other faiths:

Our witness must be based on a life that is secure in Jesus Christ. We need to be honest about this: there *are* dangers in engaging with people of another faith. We should take the language of the New



Testament about 'false spirits' seriously, and this means making good use of the 'armour of God', especially prayer. But it is also the case that other religions possess characteristics that may be very attractive. In the UK there is evidence that significant numbers of British young women have become Muslim because this offered a way out of the pressures of a promiscuous society. If Islam develops in a form that connects it much more closely to European culture, it is likely to become even more attractive.

This means that Christians have to know *who they are!* If our identity in Christ is superficial, we will be vulnerable. I wonder if people who get angry with Muslims and aggressive in their approach, may actually be *insecure*. This is not to imply that to live in a hostile other-faith environment is ever an easy situation. But the first principle is to *know Christ experientially*, as that makes us who we truly are.

Take time and effort to listen and learn so that you really understand what your friend of another faith believes. Ida Glaser in *The Bible and Other Faiths* suggests that the Ten Commandments provide a

valuable guide to relationships with people. Her comments on the ninth commandment ('you shall not give false testimony against your neighbour') are very interesting:

This commandment for me is the basis of all my attempts to talk about other faiths. It has been the driving force in my study of Islam. I want to speak truth about God in my theology and mission, and I want to speak truth about my neighbour in my teaching. This is no easy task: it involves careful study to find out what their faith teaches, careful attention to find out who my neighbour is, and what he or she believes and feels and does, and recognition that the faith includes a great variety of people....

Notice the distinction here between 'what the faith teaches' and 'what the person believes': the two may not be the same. 'Connecting' involves both intellectual knowledge and personal relationship.

The Cross of Christ must be central in witness and in the life of the person who is witnessing. In the end, our witness to friends of other faiths must lead to the Cross. It does so by a natural path because it is the Cross that makes our own faith distinctive. But we need caution, because it is likely that serious misconceptions exist about what this means to us. Where the Cross has been the symbol of conquest and domination it is hardly surprising that for some people it is a repugnant symbol. This demands that we reflect deeply on the meaning of the Cross of Jesus Christ. An arrogant, proud form of mission is a total contradiction in terms! Martin Luther contrasted the 'theology of glory' with the 'theology of the cross'; only the latter is authentically Christian.

Finally and crucially, don't seek people's conversion in a way that requires them to become carbon copies of yourself. This is still our tendency, to add to our tribe and increase our numbers. But that is not New Testament mission! From the Council of Jerusalem onwards (Acts 15), the apostles allowed people to follow Christ within their cultural context. In Andrew Walls' words, people are *converted* not *proselytized*. This means encouraging people to confess Christ within their world and to try to turn that whole world towards Jesus who is Lord of all. I suggest that in witness to people of other faiths we may at least sometimes need to imitate Jesus and say to someone anxious to cut his or her former links, 'Go back home and tell [them] how much the Lord has done for you' (Mark 5:19).



Research can help us listen!

Research helps SU Hong Kong to listen to the elderly.
General Secretary Lucia Cheung reports:

The Hong Kong population is aging, with over 40,000 elderly Christians! In the 1990s, we were hearing lots of voices from churches asking, 'What resources are available for our older people?' We listened more carefully by conducting a full-scale survey and discovered that no Bible reading materials were available for this group. The outcome has been not only a series of Bible Guides written specifically for the older generation, but also a supporting strategy that includes Bible reading Day Camps and meetings for the elderly, and seminars to help pastors to understand their needs. One pastor told us about an old lady who knew that she would die very soon. She realized she might not have time to wait for the last issue of these special comments to be published, so she asked SU Hong Kong for a copy of the draft to read!

In what ways might you use research or focus groups to shape your SU resources or programs?



Connecting with Urban People

The letter to the Romans is often read as a context-less document, a timeless treatment of systematic theology. But of course this is not the case: it is addressed to Christ-followers in Rome, the economic and cultural heart of an empire that dominated the known world. Paul is writing to people who make the subversive and controversial confession that Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord. They are mainly poor and live in tenement apartments not unlike our modern slums. These people are 'loved by God' and 'called to be saints' (Romans 1:7). How could we miss the *urban relevance* of the Roman letter?

The context of an urban world today

The figures for world urban growth are well known: 10% global urban population in 1900, 50% in 2007 and an anticipated 75% by 2050. In a sense we are all urban people now! 'Connecting with Urban People' means understanding ourselves. Urban values permeate society through the media based there. The social divisions of the urban world are also familiar. The division between rich and poor is evident in cities like Lagos or São Paulo, but there are deep divisions also within a nation like USA, with the privileged retreating into luxury gated communities and large numbers of people slipping into poverty.

The Bible and the City

The Bible has been read in different, often contradictory, ways with regard to the city. Jacques Ellul notes that the first city-builder is Cain the murderer – a man in flight from God (Gen. 4:17). This reading sees the city as a human creation and an act of rebellion; it provides an escape from God. And we can easily reach this conclusion if we think of cities like Las Vegas or Dubai. We can adopt attitudes of *anti-urbanism* and dream of flight from the city. By contrast, the American theologian Harvie Conn bases his understanding of the city on Genesis 1:26-28 which he calls 'the cultural mandate'. God gives human beings the authority to transform the created world and Conn believes that this includes an implicit authority to build cities. This then becomes the foundation for a *pro-urban* reading of the Bible. How can we evaluate these contrasting approaches? Let me suggest some principles:

1. Almost the whole of the Bible has to be read against an urban background. The story of the Exodus, the encounter with the cities of Canaan, and the great urban empires of Assyria, Babylon,



Youth Centre children with SU Got God packs

Listening to a community

Gabriella Webber runs an SU youth centre in Durban, South Africa.

'It has taken dedication to build relationship with the communities, to win the trust of parents and children. Because there are many Zimbabwean refugees and migrants from rural areas living in these communities, xenophobia has been a real problem recently. But when children grasp that God's love is for everyone, they take that message home – and become agents for change.'



Persia and, finally, Rome – these provide Israel's context throughout her history. It is to this urban context that the prophets respond.

2. The creation of Jerusalem was intended to offer the world an alternative vision of life in the city. Zion, the city of God, was to demonstrate that urban life could be *holy*, that the values of the Covenant could shape life together within the city. So we have the motif of two cities, Jerusalem and Babylon, running through the Old Testament.
3. The Old Testament contains clear indications of God's love for the people of cities beyond Jerusalem. The classic text is the book of Jonah, and its crucial question: 'Should I not be concerned about that great city?' But elsewhere in Scripture



Connecting with Today's People

we have other key statements, including the mind-blowing 'Letter of Jeremiah' to the exiles in Babylon, in which God urges them to 'seek the peace and prosperity of the city' (29:7).

4. The early church was overwhelmingly urban. Paul was a city person and his missionary strategy was focused on cities. The early Christians used the word *ecclesia* to designate their fellowship. This secular word describes the assembly of citizens, so for Christians to claim it was a bold and controversial move. They were presenting their fellowship as the true hope for community within the city.
5. The vision of God's future in the book of Revelation is clearly *urban*. Once again we have two cities – Babylon and New Jerusalem. One of these, the city of man, given over to greed and evil, will collapse (Revelation 18). The other is eternal and represents the real future (Revelation 21). Christians are called to long for the City of God, but also to live in today's cities as citizens of the heavenly city.

Back to the city

In *Emmaus* I suggest that the vision of the risen Christ demands a return to the city (Luke 24:33,34). What does the same risen Christ ask of Christians in the urban world of today? I make four suggestions:

1. We have to ask how the gospel is to be presented as truly 'good news' in our divided cities. There is one gospel, but it comes in different ways in contrasting urban contexts. And a key question is this: is the gospel a message of human liberation or eternal salvation? The answer of course, is *both*. The starving and destitute need more than the promise of eternal life – they need *bread*. But equally, the wealthy and privileged must know that the call of Christ involves a cost – the cost of discipleship and personal transformation.
2. We have to give serious attention to *ecclesiology* – the shape of the church as an alternative community that is both missional and inclusive.
3. We need to re-visit the doctrine of Christian calling. That is, we must encourage professional people, in politics, architecture, the arts, to take the Lordship of Christ

seriously and so make a difference in the city. A minister in Glasgow recently asked my students, 'What place does beauty have in urban mission?' This is a period of astonishing opportunity, when the end of modernity is creating wide open doors for the gospel. But this will mean releasing the Bible from exclusive preoccupation with personal, devotional life, and loosing it on the cultural and social world.

4. We urgently need *prophetic* voices, able to bridge the gap between God's revelation of himself in Scripture and the context of our world.

'While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them... And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?"' (Luke 24:15,16).



A helpful website

www.scripture-engagement.org is a project of the Forum of Bible Agencies International that seeks to make known good resources and ideas. Do explore it and consider whether your movement has resources that should be posted on it.

You will also find information here about the FOBAI *Hearts Burning* Conference in Malaysia in October. All three Ministry Coordinators are involved in planning SU's participation in this event. If you would like to present a workshop or come to learn and observe, please contact Pauline Hoggarth (paulineh@su-international.org).

Remember to let us know if you would like your personal copy of Catalyst!

Write to Sue Stott (a1admin@su-international.org) to ask to receive a PDF of *Catalyst* by email. Please say if you would like the French, Spanish or English version. If it is difficult for you to receive email attachments, please also let us know and we will aim to send you a print copy. *Catalyst* is also available online at www.su-international.org

Thank you!

Thank you to everyone who has contributed to *Catalyst* Your willingness to share your stories and thoughts with colleagues around the world will not be in vain!

Over to you again

Over to you! It is our prayer that *Catalyst* will encourage and inspire you. Use it for both personal and group reflection and discussion... and let us know how it goes!