

A Christian Mission for West Stepney

I should explain that I wrote this document at the end of 1962, and it was published by Fr Joe Williamson (former vicar of St Paul's, Dock Street) in January 1963. I had spent four years in the Cable Street area, and was hoping to do my first curacy in the London Docks area. But the then Bishop of Stepney, Evered Lunt (nicknamed 'Evered the Unready') forgot to mention this to the Bishop of London, so I was relocated, at about four weeks notice, to Hoxton (which worked out very well).

To my knowledge the two Bishops took no notice of the document, indeed I don't think they even acknowledged receipt of it. It was certainly never discussed.

The language and assumptions are very dated. I was 23 at the time. Much of it, read now, is naive, patronising and full of questionable ideological assumptions.

In spite of all this, it may be useful. It proposed (though did not use the phrase) a 'mission action area', and I am interested that this has now been made official 41 years on. Of course, the context in 1963 was quite different as were the reasons for my proposal.

KEN LEECH

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I. NATURE OF WEST STEPNEY.

The area to which I am referring in this document is roughly that bounded by Houndsditch on the west, Spitalfields on the north, New Road and Cannon Street Road on the east, and Cable Street on the south. It is in character very different from the rest of Stepney.

1. It is the "coloured quarter," probably the most racially mixed area of England. Its cosmopolitan nature is an old characteristic of the area (see Michael Banton's book **The Coloured Quarter** for a brief historical account.) But in recent years there have been notable increases in West Indian, Indian and Pakistani and West African immigration. There are also large East and North African and Maltese groups. As well as a place of residence, the area forms a social centre for coloured people from other parts of London.
2. It is an area into which, because of its proximity to the docks as well as to other factors, a large floating population has moved. This floating population is constantly changing. It includes many of the coloured people referred to above, but it also includes seamen of many nationalities, long-distance lorry drivers, wayfarers, and a very large number of people who are physically or mentally unsettled: homeless, drifting people, social outcasts, children of unhappy marriages, etc.
3. It has become, like many other unsettled areas, a centre of vice and violence. Prostitutes and homosexuals come here, the former in large numbers. Little reliable information exists about the latter, but their numbers are probably large and may increase. Vice racketeering goes hand in hand with violence, and street and café fights are common. Certain parts of the area have thus become centres for criminal elements.
4. Among the many drifting people are two groups who call for special mention: the methylated spirit drinkers and the drug addicts. There have been meths drinkers in Stepney for a long time. Probably they are mostly older men. Drug smuggling, especially of Indian Hemp, is

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A DOCUMENT CONCERNING THE NEEDS OF CHRISTIAN PASTORAL

WORK IN THE WESTERN PART OF STEPNEY, E.1.

To be submitted to the Bishops of London and Stepney and a number of Clergy and Laity.

By **KENNETH LEECH**

This document is offered in humility as a contribution to thought and prayer about Christian work in the area of West Stepney between Spitalfields and the London Docks, where I believe that a series of peculiar problems confront the Church's mission. This is not an exhaustive survey but merely an exploratory and essentially personal series of ideas. I have drawn chiefly on my own small (four years) acquaintance with and work in this area: others with many years of experience may disagree with some of my suggestions, but I hope they will agree that the issues raised are vital ones demanding most urgent prayer and action. Knowing your interest in the problems of this area, I am sending this to you for your consideration, criticism and prayer.

common in the west end of Cable Street and in the Brick Lane—Old Montague Street area, and police arrests for this are a usual feature of the local newspapers.

II. THE CHURCH SITUATION.

The Anglican churches in the area are: St. Botolph's, Aldgate (in the City of London); Christ Church, Spitalfields; St. Paul's, Dock Street; St. George's-in-the-East; and (on the fringes), St. Philip's, Stepney. Between 1945 and 1962 there was a Franciscan mission house with hostel and club in Cable Street and this was a centre for pastoral and other work among the coloured population.

Two of the above churches are involved in special work:—

1. St. Botolph's, Aldgate.

- (a) There are clubs for boys and teenagers, and special attention is given to the juvenile delinquent.
- (b) Attached to the church is a rehabilitation centre for down-and-out men, and there is a great deal of work with drunks and meths drinkers.
- (c) In 1961, the congregation, largely West Indian, which had grown up around the Franciscan house was transferred to St. Botolph's.

St. Botolph's is in a key position on Aldgate corner and the fact that it has little normal parish life means that it can devote a good deal of time to these special ministries. Its disadvantages are that its Rector does not live even within the area, and that it is cut off from the areas where most people live. Thus it is ideal for certain types of work, but useless for others.

2. St. Paul's, Dock Street.

Here the Rev. Joseph Williamson has begun a special work with prostitutes and girls in moral danger. The centre for this work in Stepney is Church House, Wellclose Square, and there is a second house away from London where girls can free themselves from the vice area.

III. THE NEED OF FURTHER CHRISTIAN WORK IN THE AREA.

In addition to the normal parish needs, the following special pastoral needs stand out, which are clearly outside the scope of the parish system:—

1. Coloured Immigrants.

Generally, there is need of special pastoral work in helping to integrate coloured people into the life of the area and of the local churches. Much of this work could be and ought to be done by the parishes, but certain requirements call for an extra-parochial special ministry (though working in the closest co-operation with the parish clergy):—

(a) **West Indians.** Most are Christians, but often find conventional Anglican churches cold and formal, and often interpret the so-called English reserve as unfriendliness, and may lapse very soon. There is need of spiritual guidance in the way of house meetings for prayer and Bible study, social fellowship, and so on. Racial prejudice is chiefly manifested against West Indians and so there is need for Christian work in promoting inter-racial friendship. It is important, too, to have a Christian centre where help can be given to recent migrants and where problems of housing, employment, and so on can be discussed.

(b) **Christian Africans.** What has been said of West Indians can be repeated here. In addition, the building up of a keen group of African Christians would be of great value in evangelistic work and in exploring new patterns of worship. The assistance of African students could be valuable here. Indeed, the African churches have much to teach the Church of England.

(c) **Moslems.** Many Africans and Indians are Moslems. There is a great need of evangelistic work among Moslems, but this needs men with understanding of Islam. Much harm has been done in the past by an ignorant aggressive approach. A ministry to Moslems here could well be a full-time pioneer work for one man, so vast is the field.

(d) **Non-English speaking Immigrants.** There are clear signs of the growth of large Hindi, Urdu and Bengali speaking

groups. Already there are many Swahili-speaking Africans. In both Indian and African groups there is a very large Moslem percentage, and among the Indians there are many Hindus and Sikhs. There are great opportunities here for evangelism as there are desperate needs for elementary educational and practical help. It is impossible to over-stress the urgency of the need for Christian workers who speak the languages to work with Indians and Pakistanis, both here and in outer suburban areas, such as Southall, to which many Indians from this part of London have now moved.

(e) **Somalis.** I mention Somalis particularly because of the amazing success of voluntary evening classes in English which were run for several years here and in which I taught. The Somali group is almost entirely Moslem and (so far) male.

Under Sections (b) to (e), I am convinced that the missionary societies should be asked to provide workers with knowledge of the languages to work in this area. The missionaries have facilities and experience (e.g. of Islam) which would be invaluable here. It is absurd to expect the parishes alone to cope with this immense task. I would draw attention here to the article by Father Neville, S.S.F., in *The Pilot* issued from St. Paul's, Dock Street, September, 1962, and based on 18 years of work with overseas immigrants in Stepney.

2. Unstable Populations.

Pastoral work is needed with the large population which inhabits the many dockland cafés and clubs. There is scope for Christian work here in simply sitting in cafés and making friends with people, since loneliness is very widespread. Under the heading of "unstable populations" I include seamen, tramps and wayfarers, the clientele of the three Salvation Army hostels (Middlesex Street, Whitechapel Road, and Garford Street), of the Church Army hostel (Johnson Street), and of the Rowton Houses, and the large number of people generally classed as social misfits. There is a large teenage group, often delinquent, runaways, etc. The cafés of Cable Street formed an underworld of drifting people and this underworld will remain in the Whitechapel area and must be penetrated for Christ. Centres are needed for homeless people on the lines of those at St. Botolph's, Aldgate, and at

St. George's Methodist Church in Cable Street. There is scope for ecumenical co-operation here, and Christians might work together with Jewish groups in tackling the homeless problem: indeed to tackle it demands the combined forces of as many groups as possible, religious and secular, in the whole area. The numbers of homeless may well increase in this part of London and there must be apostles of the homeless. We could learn from the work of the Abbé Pierre in Paris and of Father Borelli in Naples, Again, ministry to social outcasts could be a full-time ministry.

3. Prostitutes.

Here the work is established on the solid foundations laid by Fr. Williamson, but there will be a need for a young priest to carry on this work and for dedicated women. The Roman Catholic Legion of Mary also do a valuable work in this sphere.

4. Homosexuals.

No work has been done even to find out how many homosexuals there are in the area. Here surely there is need of a special ministry.

5. Meths Drinkers, Alcoholics and Drug Addicts.

Links must be made more close between priests and doctors. A Christian doctor working full-time on a team of priests and laymen would be of incalculable value for work under sections 4, 5 and 6.

6. Mentally Abnormal.

Mental abnormality is alarmingly high in the area, due to its nature as a kind of "no-man's-land" and to the foul housing (among other causes). Here again links with doctors and psychiatrists are vital. One should consider, too, whether there might not be a need for a special work of Christian healing, as it were, in the area of infection. It might be possible to set up a centre or use some existing place for pastoral and other work with the mentally ill, possibly in a quieter part of Stepney, but easily accessible.

7. Ex-Prisoners and "Professional" Criminals.

The district around the west end of Cable Street and Swendenborg Square acquired a reputation for its criminal

population. Not only were the cafés and clubs an obviously easy place to which men out of prison could return without questions asked: but that district and the Brick Lane district encourage criminals and breed them. Again, a special ministry is called for.

8. Broken Homes and Children's Welfare.

The inevitable domestic breakdowns are increased in the unstable atmosphere of the area: and this demands moral welfare work of an exceptional kind.

The above sketch is incomplete, but I think it illustrates the urgency of the situation here. Some might claim that it calls more for social workers than for priests, but this would be a dangerous half-truth. What is needed is a combination of spiritual and social work **in one ministry**. I am therefore suggesting that there is an immediate need for a special inter-parochial mission of an experimental kind. It would be hard to say yet exactly what it would do. Clearly it would be involved with the problems listed above, and it would try to deal with these parts of the Church's mission in this area which, by their very nature, cannot be tackled by the parish clergy. It would also help to co-ordinate the various special activities now being operated by different churches and social welfare groups. I suggest that the aim should be a team of priests and lay men and women living and working together and covering the whole area.

It is in view of the abnormal and immense problems of this area which are outside the scope of parish priests because they cut across four or five parishes that I am asking the Bishops to consider if they might allow me, after ordination in 1964, to be allocated to a special pastoral work on the lines indicated above, possibly at first from a curacy in a local church, or from a mission house and under the guidance of an experienced priest. The Church has often recognised the existence of vocations to special ministries outside the parish system, as in the cases of priest-workmen or contemplative monks. I believe that in this part of Stepney we are confronted with an extraordinary situation which calls for an extraordinary response.

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January, 1963.