

# Seek the welfare of the city

*How as Christians do we relate to city life? David Parish thinks it is crucial that we do, and suggests four ways: **Living out the faith**, where we have to be salt and light; **Investment**, in for example ESG companies; **Benefaction** – giving, to support the poor and disadvantaged, a long biblical tradition; and **Passion**, where we have commitment and enthusiasm to bring about change. He concludes by suggesting we take some specific action this Lent.*

Opinions about cities are rarely neutral. You either love them or loathe them. To quote Henry Thoreau, "a city is hundreds of people being lonesome together" and Samuel Johnson, "if one is tired of London, one is tired of life".

They have also been with us for a long time. Urkut in Mesopotamia has been dated by archaeologists to around 3000 BC. Its origins are not clear but it seems that as agriculture replaced hunting and gathering, people gathered in villages and some, centred around trade routes or water sources, grew larger. These aggregations needed sanitation, trade centres, markets and gathering places and so the city was born.

By the time of the Assyrian empire its capital Nineveh was described as "an exceedingly great city" (Jonah 3:3). The archaeologists suggest greater Nineveh might have had 150,000 people. The ruins of the city now lie across the river from modern Mosul.

Cities can be mega-cities like Mexico City with 20 million residents and also be tiny like St David's in Wales which is Britain's smallest city and can be crossed on foot in about 30 minutes. America's small cities like Lynchburg in Virginia have populations smaller

than most London boroughs. In Britain a town needs Letters Patent from the Monarch to be able to call itself a city. There is often competition to be named the next city. Sir David Amess, the MP for Southend had campaigned for many years for the town to be made a city. After he was so brutally killed Southend was given its charter by the Queen in honour of his service to the community and the country.

The question is: given that cities are here and the majority of us either have to live in one or at least engage with it, how do we relate as Christians to the city?

Preachers are often fond of saying that God's story of redemption begins in a garden and ends in a city. The word city occurs 669 times in the Bible and the city seems central to the life and economy of the biblical world.

## Jeremiah 29

The title of this article is taken from Jeremiah 29:7. Can we learn from this chapter about how we can relate better to our cities? The context is certainly very different. The Jews had been conquered by the army of Babylon and were being taken into exile to serve that

kingdom. Babylon was unusual in that it was willing to draw from the talent of its conquered aliens to aid its structures of governance. They saw a strength in diversity. Yet why would God command his people to care about a government that looked to pagan gods and which at times indulged in extreme cruelty? Mathew Henry wrote his commentary on Jeremiah around 1710 in London. He had also lived in Chester and loved and served that city as a minister. He comments on the verse as follows:

"it is our wisdom and duty not to throw away the comfort of what we may have, because we do not have all we would have" and further "while the King protected the exiles, they must live quiet and peaceable lives under him".

Daniel, one of the exiles, would in due time rise to the highest positions in the land.

The theme of living quiet and peaceable lives, which is implicit here, is also picked up by the New Testament writers. For example 1 Timothy 2:2: "that you might lead a quiet and peaceable life". The context for Timothy is how the people of God should relate to the powers of Rome who governed Ephesus, a thriving trade city of the empire.



Peter's "live good lives among the pagans" (1 Peter 2:12) might be better translated as "conduct yourselves well among the nations where God has placed you". Peter had a more cosmopolitan mindset than the King James translators.

There have been some who take "live a quiet life" to mean avoid being involved in civic life. The line from the well-known spiritual "this world is not my home, I'm just a passing through" may be a pleasant and comforting thought, but it is not adequate theology.

How then can we engage with civic life? My reading of scripture suggests the following framework:

- Living out the faith
- Investment
- Benefaction – giving
- Passion

## Living

The first way we can bless the City is by living a Christlike life where we work and socialise. When John Stott founded the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity 40 years ago, it was to help Christians live faithful lives in the place where God had called them. One of the groups that met at LICC was the Business Study Group to produce resources and advice to those working

in industry and the City. LICC's "Life on the Front Line" DVD courses are now run by many churches and dioceses.

In Book Three of *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, John Calvin describes work as "our sentry box on the world". Our calling is to be salt and light where we are. Arno Poetzsch, German pastor and educator during the 1930s wrote a hymn:

*Salt and light on earth,  
only through your power,  
To honour your commandments  
hour by hour.*

This is one of the few hymns to focus on our being salt and light where we are.

How we are salt and light will depend on our context and personality. LICC have produced two booklets called "The One About", which has stories of how people in different trades and professions have experienced what it means to be a Christian in the working world. In some cases there has been a cost to this faithfulness. Life at work is often about finding good compromises and it is not always easy. Daniel and the others in Babylon were not working for a cosy paternalistic enterprise but for a sometimes quite ruthless and expansionist empire.

Daniel maintained his integrity by staying close to God and his word.

We need to hear Paul's words in Romans 12:2 "Don't become so well adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without thinking" (Message version).

## Investment

Some years ago I was asked to address a student Christian Union meeting at a left-leaning university.

I started my talk "Almost all of you are capitalists" and I saw the slight expressions of displeasure ripple across the faces of the group. I then asked, "how many of you have an interest-bearing savings account with no overdraft"? Surprisingly for impecunious students most of the hands went up. My next question is what happens to the surplus money in your account and only a few knew that the bank then invested it on their behalf. I am beginning to agree with some in the City who feel financial literacy should be taught in schools!

We may imagine that because our modest income does not allow us to invest in stocks and shares, investment as a Christian is not an option. However, the average senior manager should by their mid-50's have accumulated in their savings around £100,000 to invest and perhaps closer to £400,000 in their pension pot. Not







the stuff of Bill Gates or Warren Buffet but still tidy sums of money.

Investment was a normal part of life in both the Old and New Testaments. Solomon is recorded as investing in state enterprises. Trade and therefore investment in olive oil, cloth, fishing and viniculture are mentioned throughout the Bible. It is interesting that all the parables of Jesus that are about money, such as the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14–30) are told in an urban setting. It was clearly part of the way the world was.

However, Jesus was critical of the rich neglecting the poor (Luke 16:25; Matthew 19:21), and in the last ten years the focus on corporate social responsibility and the environment has caused a shift in the thinking of the way business should be run. Both those writing from a secular perspective and those writing from explicitly Christian perspectives like Michael Schluter and Richard Higginson have questioned whether a marketplace solely focussed on shareholder return can survive. Even so, attempts at reform and the legal changes needed are being resisted in some quarters.

To quote former City lawyer James Featherby: “laissez-faire capitalism, riding the waves of deregulation, looks

to have been badly damaged below the water line despite the undeniable benefit it has brought”<sup>2</sup>.

However, ahead of reform, we can invest in those companies that are attempting to adopt an Environmental, Social and Good Governance (ESG) approach<sup>3</sup> – though some sifting needs to be done, particularly with Unit Trusts and Bonds, to make sure the majority of the investment really is ESG.

In the USA faith-driven investment groups are emerging to offer advice and opinion about ethical investment.

## Benefaction

For the wealthy Roman there was an expectation that they would share their wealth through being patrons to others. In return these clients would visit the benefactor’s home each morning and show their gratitude in words and helpful actions to serve their patron.

In his book *Seek the Welfare of the City* Bruce Winter demonstrates how this practice was also common among Christians. Phoebe in Romans 16:2 is described as a “benefactor to many” (NRSV) and the Greek *prostatis pollon* is rendered “patron to many” in the ESV.

Many scholars think that the Erastus mentioned in Romans 16 is probably the

same Erastus who is commemorated by a plaque found in ancient Corinth in tribute of him donating money for a public square.

Paul in writing to the Gentile churches reminds them of the importance of the gift – *charis* – to the poor in the Jerusalem church being part of their duty. Indeed in writing to the wealthy church in Corinth he makes a heavy point of the fact they are not giving as much as the less wealthy church in Macedonia (2 Cor 9).

It is easy to try and view wealth as something the other person has and that philanthropy is only for the high-net-worth earners and millionaires. The Giving Pledge is only open to billionaires who pledge to give away 50% of their fortune to charity either during their lifetime or in their wills. This seems far beyond the reach of most in the middle range of managers who typically read FIBQ. However David Sainsbury was still an HR manager in the family company when he decided to set up his own charitable trust to be able to give in a tax-efficient manner.

This trust became the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, and as David’s wealth increased this has become one of the major donor foundations in the UK. For those with more modest incomes





it is still possible by using Gift Aid or accounts with CAF or Stewardship to give in a tax-efficient way. New Philanthropy Capital was established to help those with the means to donate to do so in a way that helps people plan their giving and decide the kinds of causes they wish to support long-term rather than take a “scatter gun” approach to donating.

In the USA a group called *The Gathering* also offers help and advice in a similar way to Christians with the means to donate. Philanthropy enables faith-based charities to do amazing things for our cities. Here are two quotes, the first from Luke Watson, the CEO of youth charity XLP:

“We work with young people from tough backgrounds; young people growing up in areas typified by high levels of poverty, crime and unemployment, and low school achievement. We work with them in their communities, on their estates, in their schools and Pupil Referral Units, offering opportunities, hope and support in order to help them reach positive futures. School exclusions

have a massive impact on the life outcomes of young people, so we aim to keep them in school, out of gangs and out of trouble.”

The second is from Joe Lowther, CEO of Sports charity KICK:

“KICK impacts communities in London by delivering values-driven sport, street dance, mentoring and chaplaincy to make a transformational difference to young people’s physical, mental and spiritual health.”

## Passion

People who bring about change are passionate about what they do, and they have plans about how to do it. Christians often say how God prompted a thought when they were praying, about a new business idea or social project. There are some amazing stories in the past issues of FIBQ.

For a time at work I was part of a new ventures team, and in order to persuade the organisation to adopt a service or product, you had to be passionate about what it could deliver for the customer and the company.

Throughout Scripture we find passionate, committed men and women who changed their world, for example Gideon, David, Nehemiah and the 12 men from varied backgrounds, skills and levels in society who as disciples of Jesus changed the world.

At present I am part of a working group on decarbonising transport. It’s not easy. Petrol and diesel vehicles are low cost and have an unrivalled power to weight ratio. That is why for the last 100 years transport and global supply chains have developed so well; and yet diesel rail, shipping and aviation each emit about 3% of global emissions, so change has to happen. There are some challenging options ahead and it’s fun being part of a group that is enthusiastic about what it is doing.

## What can we do

Advent and Lent are great seasons of the year for reflection and change. Why not commit to one or two actions that seek to support the business or community where you live and work? Positive change in the corporate world will feed through to creating better more liveable cities. 

1. Arno Poetsch, “Im Licht der Ewigkeit”, song 309, translation mine.
2. James Featherby, “The White Swan Formula”, LICC, 2009, p 21.
3. See Gary Cundill’s article in FIBQ 21.3, pp.16-19, for a Christian perspective on ESG.



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