

Urban Expression:

Anabaptist Church Planting

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I stumbled across the Anabaptist tradition as a young urban church planter in London in the 1980s. Wrestling with issues of injustice, violence, community, and discipleship, I found fresh theological and practical resources in Anabaptism and increasingly identified myself with this tradition. In 1997, with colleagues who were also drawn to Anabaptism, I founded *Urban Expression*, a small mission agency committed to holistic ministry and church planting in poor urban communities.² Our teams are involved in a wide range of initiatives, including campaigning for justice in the areas of housing and food poverty, environmental regeneration, support for people with mental health issues, initiatives among the long-term unemployed, and work with children and families. We currently have fourteen teams in England, eight in The Netherlands, and emerging initiatives in Sweden and Canada.

Although not all team members are Anabaptists, *Urban Expression* is widely perceived as an Anabaptist approach to church planting and urban mission. While we have strong relational links with the Anabaptist Network and Mennonite Trust in the UK, with the Scandinavian Anabaptist Network, and Mennonite Church Eastern Canada, the perception that *Urban Expression* is Anabaptist is primarily rooted in our core values, priorities, and ways of working. Although none of these is uniquely Anabaptist, together they embody an Anabaptist approach to mission. What follows is a sample of these with a brief commentary that makes connections with the Anabaptist tradition:

We believe that the gospel works through relationships and that serving God consists largely in building life-giving relationships with others.

We encourage our teams to start nothing for at least the first year, to spend

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² See <http://www.urbanexpression.org.uk>.

time getting to know their neighbors, to build relationships rather than running events, to join in with what others are doing, to develop partnerships, and to focus on community building rather than worship services. We have learned from the Anabaptist tradition, especially as mediated by the London Mennonite Centre, the importance of relationships, hospitality, and community. Eating together and with others is central to the mission strategies of all of our teams.

We recognize that Christian faith is a journey and we are committed to helping people move forward, wherever they are at present.

Our teams operate in a post-Christendom context. In these urban communities many people have had no contact with the church and have no knowledge of the Christian faith. Journeys to faith are usually slow and often tortuous. We value the Anabaptist emphasis on “following” Jesus — the recognition that discipleship is a journey — and we understand evangelism as accompanying people on their journeys, rather than pushing them to make decisions.

We see teamwork, networking, and mutual accountability as vital, recognizing that individuals and churches need each other.

We recruit and deploy small self-funding teams — small enough not to impose too much on their neighborhoods, self-funding to avoid dependency, and teams to offer mutual support. We provide opportunities for our teams to interact with each other, learn and reflect together, and share joys and struggles. We wrestle with theological and ethical issues. The Anabaptist tradition undergirds these commitments with its emphasis on mutual accountability and welcoming the insights of all members of the community.

We recognize the importance of taking risks and the demands of mission in the inner city, and we believe that it is acceptable to fail.

We know that becoming an Anabaptist in the sixteenth century was very risky and often resulted in suffering. We appreciate the insight that suffering is normal for followers of Jesus — and the challenge this insight presents to comfortable Western Christians. Our teams are deployed in neighborhoods that experience much suffering and deprivation. They face significant challenges and are aware that their efforts may come to nothing. There is no guarantee of success (whatever that means). Some of our teams have had to withdraw without achieving their aims, and this has been very painful.

We believe in discouraging dependency and developing indigenous leadership within maturing churches that will have the capacity to sustain and reproduce themselves.

If churches are to thrive and persist in poor urban communities, they need leaders who are rooted in the local culture. We have struggled to develop such leaders, but it remains a priority for us. We are encouraged to read that the early Anabaptist communities tended to recognize leaders emerging from within their own congregations, rather than importing leaders from elsewhere.

We acknowledge our dependence on God and affirm our continual need of prayer and God's empowering Spirit.

Having little institutional, political or economic power, early Anabaptists emphasized strongly their reliance on the grace and power of God, mediated by the Holy Spirit. Our teams have very little in the way of financial resources, access to buildings is limited, and influence is primarily through relationships and the building of trust. Our regular prayer days are expressions of our dependence on God.

We want to learn from others, seeking to shape what we do in light of the experiences, discoveries, successes, and mistakes of fellow-workers.

Anabaptist teachers regularly invited those who heard them to offer other insights and correct them if necessary — this was very unusual in the sixteenth century and remains distinctive today. We do not have all the answers to the challenges of urban mission; we need the insights of others and we network widely in order to learn from other agencies.

We realize the importance of living uncluttered lives, holding possessions lightly, and recognizing that all we have is to be at God's disposal.

Anabaptists were condemned by others for their attitude towards possessions, as they insisted these should be available to others in need. We know that not all Anabaptists today live simple lives, but we believe this is part of the Anabaptist vision. Our teams talk openly about their financial resources and needs, live quite simply, and share freely with each other. One of our London teams, as it formed, decided to clear all their debts through sharing their resources. And all of our teams are self-funding: *Urban Expression* does not provide salaries or housing.

We are committed to following God on the margins and in the gaps, expecting to discover God at work among powerless people and in places of weakness.

We know that most of the early Anabaptists were poor and powerless, and that they were convinced this enabled them to understand Scripture better

than their well-fed and powerful contemporaries. One of the legacies of the Christendom era is the identification of the church with the wealthy, powerful, and affluent. Our teams work in areas of deprivation, in which few churches are present or thriving, and build relationships with those who are on the margins. As we consider areas in which to deploy further teams, we are interested in those falling into the bottom 5 to 10 percent when measured in terms of deprivation.

We are committed to being Jesus-centered in our view of the Bible, our understanding of mission, and all aspects of discipleship.

Christocentrism in all aspects of theology, biblical interpretation, missiology, and our understandings of discipleship is a principle we have derived explicitly from our engagement with the Anabaptist tradition and is one of the aspects of this tradition we most value. Our teams frequently encounter people who know nothing of the Jesus story but who respond, not so much to doctrines about Jesus, but to his life and teaching.

We are committed to a vision of justice, peace, and human flourishing for the city and all its inhabitants.

Although at times Anabaptism has been fairly criticized for passivity and failure to pursue justice, at its best the tradition embodies a passionate concern for social justice and a commitment to active peacemaking, rather than separatist withdrawal. It is this Anabaptist legacy that we draw on in our witness in urban communities fraught with injustice and conflict. This commitment meant that members of one of our London teams chose to reach out to leaders of the local mosque immediately after 9/11, assuring them that Muslims were not perceived as the enemy and speaking about Jesus as the Prince of Peace.

We are committed to uncluttered church, focused on mission, rooted in local culture, and equipping all to develop and use their God-given gifts.

Our teams are planting churches that are simple in structure, participative in ethos, and contextual in the way they operate. We recognize that early Anabaptists pioneered a much simpler form of church than their contemporaries and insisted that all members of their congregations should use their spiritual gifts. Most of the churches we have planted meet in homes or rented facilities. A church in London names being “multivoiced” as a core practice.

We are committed to unconditional service, holistic ministry, bold proclamation, prioritizing the poor, and being a voice for the voiceless.

Given their origins and history of marginalization, it is not surprising that Anabaptists have empathized with the poor and the powerless. We appreciate

this, and their commitment to holistic mission, although we realize that bold proclamation may have characterized the first generations but has often not characterized later generations. Our teams continue to explore ways to share the good news of Jesus authentically in both word and deed.

We are committed to respecting and building relationship with other faith communities and averse to all forms of manipulation or erosion of liberty.

Although early Anabaptists had little contact with other faiths, they rejected the call to go to war against the Turks. They were pioneers of religious liberty and non-coercion in matters of faith. Many of our teams are in multifaith neighborhoods and have developed life-giving friendships and creative partnerships with members of other faith communities. One of our London teams has partnered with leaders of the local mosque to address the issue of drug-taking in the local community, spurring the police to take action against those selling drugs. A team leader in Manchester has provided pastoral and practical support to a Muslim family with a relative convicted on terrorism charges, helping to prevent victimization.

Those of us who have drawn from the Anabaptist tradition also value the humility that we find within the tradition and embodied by many Anabaptist followers of Jesus. We should be very clear, therefore, that the values and commitments mentioned here (and others not included in this sample) are aspirations rather than achievements. And some of us draw gratefully also on other Christian traditions, recognizing that no one tradition has all we need to resource faithful discipleship in our post-Christendom context.