



Reflecting on 'new unity movements for mission' – from USA to UK

This is a personal paper for discussion from Jim Currin, Evangelisation, Mission and Media, CTE

Introduction

This is a report following attendance at *City Advance*¹ and *Movement Day*² in New York, Oct 2014. It is a personal reflection and represents no other views than my own.

These are initial headlines to report back and thank colleagues at CTE (and leaders of *City Advance*) for the privilege to attend. It is a reflect on how the new unity movements for mission in North America contrast and compare with those I see them in England.

Background

The 'new unity movements for mission' in England are town and city based networks of individual churches praying together and responding to community need. The network of 100 such movements is supported by the *Evangelical Alliance* through Roger Sutton and the website www.wegather.co.uk.

I had attended a day conference of these network leaders from across England held in London in May 2014. Roger then suggested I might be interested in joining him and one or two other people at the 2 inter-connected conferences in New York. I was grateful to Roger for the suggestion; to Glenn Barth (from America) for an email invitation, and to CTE for supporting the proposal to attend and reflect.

City Advance (21st /22nd Oct. 2014) was a day and a half gathering of teams from 10-12 networks in North America and from some other parts of the world (UK, Brussels, Philippines). The 10 largest networks in North America were not present as they have their own conference as a 'learning community'.

City Advance was organised in a meeting hall of 5th Avenue Presbyterian Church in Manhattan. This was a pre meeting of *Movement Day* (23rd Oct. 2014) which brought 1500 delegates from New York and North America to the ballroom of the Marriott Marquis Hotel in Times Square.

My intention of attending both was to hear stories from outside the UK that could inform our work in England re 'new unity movements for mission'.

¹ <http://www.cityadvance.net/>

² <http://www.movementday.com/movement-day/interactive-tracks/gospel-movements>

This then, is a reflection of the stories from people met heard; the conference experience in New York; and some thoughts in the cold light of day having returned to the context in England (which, note, is different again to other countries in the UK).

These are headlines (not in priority order) that compare and contrast 'unity for mission movements' in our respective contexts, and in particular in relation to *Churches Together in England*.³

Comparison

1. **New networks are emerging** in other parts of the world and particularly the USA with churches working together to 'transform community' in their neighbourhood.
2. **The catalyst has often been Church leaders praying together.** These networks of prayer are, in some cases established 20+ years. In New York this is called *Concerts of Prayer*⁴. *Movement Day 2014* began with the CEO, Mac Pier, saying that the present conference of 1500 delegates traces its roots back to 'church pastors of New York who started praying 20-25 years ago'. This is true in England too, where church leaders in York, Swindon, and Carlisle for example, have also been meeting for 20 years.
3. **Focussed on 'home' mission.** Both the USA and English contexts of new movements are focussed on 'home' mission and the 'local neighbourhood'. This is in some stark contrast to the missionary 'gospel movements' that sprang out of the *Edinburgh 1910 World Missionary Conference* which often (though not always) meant 'overseas' mission.
4. **'Community engagement' alongside 'proclamation evangelism'.** On both sides of the Atlantic it seems that there is some redefining of what Christians understand to be 'mission'. 'Finding out what God is doing and joining in' seems to be the phrase that is most often quoted, including by our previous Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. Several references to this theological drive were evident at *City Advance*, especially when more than one person spoke of the 'people of peace' in a local community can be 'more Christian than Christian' and 'God working outside the church'. The theology of *Missio Dei* reflects this in the English context (cf *Mission-Shaped Unity: New Ways of being Churches Together*.⁵)
5. **'Word and Deed Mission'.** This is a phrase in common use in the English context but well-illustrated in the North American stories too. As Roger Sutton observes⁶, traditionally the evangelical church has been strong on 'word' mission and the new movements illustrate 'deed' mission. The changes are evident in both our contexts – and both are trying to keep them together in creative tension. I was struck that the *Luis Palau Association* in Portland had a big preaching evangelistic 'festival' that produced the unity movement that now has staff (2 were present at *City Advance*). This has spawned a number of local community engagement initiatives (fostering and adoption was one such with 100 churches involved and 135 families in the process of offering homes). In the English context we have generally not had preaching festivals and it is interesting to note that a major mission initiative across

³ www.cte.org.uk

⁴ <http://www.copgny.org/default.aspx>

⁵ http://www.grovebooks.co.uk/cart.php?target=product&product_id=17656&substring=

⁶ Speaking to Ecumenical Officers consultation 2014

London (*Crossing London*)⁷ decided not to have such a festival for preaching the gospel (though explored twice) rather taking the line of training Christians to share the gospel in the personal networks – as has Hope with the *Sharing Jesus* resource⁸. Whichever way is chosen, whether in Portland or London, word and deed are emphasised together and there is ongoing discussion as to how they relate to each other.

6. **The model of Jesus.** At *City Advance* Glenn Barth spoke of sharing the gospel which is 'not a formula' as 'Jesus had a uniquely individual message for each of the people he met'. He also said, 'With Jesus, proclamation and doing the deeds go hand in hand' as well as other references to doing mission the way Jesus did it. The model of Jesus in mission and evangelisation is topical in England too, as in the training manual *Sharing Jesus* already mentioned where I, along with others, write about this. Further reflection and exploration of this as a new paradigm for mission is in *Sharing faith the Jesus way*⁹ and *Evangelisation and Ecumenism: a new Chapter*¹⁰. The inspiration for considering the model of Jesus compared to that of St Paul first came to me through Geoff Pearson when Evangelism Advisor for the Church of England and in the phrase of Pope Paul VI re Jesus being the 'very first and greatest evangelizer'¹¹. To me it is interesting that Jesus as the model for evangelism seems now established in relation to word and deed mission - following the Gospel accounts - when many books in the past pointed to St Paul and his missionary methods and message.
7. **'Community transformation'.** If there is one phrase which is most often used of the new movements in mission it is possibly 'community transformation'. It is based on a theology of 'place' as well as 'people' and redemption. As a result of this the focus of mission is the local community, as identified by its geography. The particular location is often further defined by areas of poverty or recognised community need eg crime rate, school location, local authority etc. The common intent of many movements for mission – quoted on their websites – is the kind of 'transformation' that reflects the Lord's Prayer and the phrase 'Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven'. Roger Sutton from *We Gather* in England asks, 'What would our communities look like in 5 years' time if we saw the kingdom come? What would it look like in 10 years' time if we continue to pray?' 'Community Transformation' is often illustrated by reduced crime, less unemployment, building relationships, partnerships and projects that makes the kind of difference that is noticed by police, education and Local Authority leaders.
8. **These movements are generally inclusive of church tradition.** Although clearly motivated and supported by 'evangelical' church leaders (and culturally shaped by it and in England supported by the Evangelical Alliance), the new movements can represent a broad coalition within that tradition (including otherwise quite independent churches). They can also include Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians (I think it was Jeff Kriesler at *City Advance* who spoke about a Roman Catholic bishop involved).
9. **Diversity is celebrated.** When leaders describe 'unity' movements and churches working together, the message is positive. Speakers are pleased to say that different traditions are represented, sometimes working together for the first time. As Roger Sutton has observed,

⁷ <http://www.crossinglondon.co.uk/>

⁸ <http://www.hopetogether.org.uk/Groups/133405/HOPE/Resources/Books/Books.aspx#.VI7vLKNFCmQ>

⁹ www.jesus360.org.uk

¹⁰ Journal 'One in Christ' June 2014.

¹¹ *Evangelii Gaudium* 1975

'In the past "unity" in the evangelical tradition has been around "truth" – now there is more emphasis on being part of the body of Christ and "doing more together than we can do apart". In a presentation about unity for mission movements in England, Roger also said, 'diversity is crucial – mission is more than the sum of its parts'.

10. **Relationships and Partnerships are key**, not only between pastors but between churches and community networks and representatives. I was surprised – given the apparent church tradition of most participants in the two conferences – that the partnership with an openly gay Mayor was heralded as good news and without criticism. I would have thought this new territory for both the pastors and the mayor at a previous *Movement Day* conference.
11. **Specific needs of the community are addressed**. Work with schools, food distribution, human trafficking, fostering and adoption, praying for neighbourhoods, civic engagement and festivals are similar activities in North America to those in England. *Adopt a School*, *Praying for the Neighbourhood*, and *Not on my Watch* (sex trafficking) were interesting titles of USA initiatives meeting local need. In times of the current economic pressure where Government and Local Authority cuts bite hard, local churches alongside community groups are taking on social initiatives.
12. **Increasingly welcome by statutory bodies**. It has been noticeable on hearing stories on both sides of the Atlantic that statutory bodies like Local Authorities, Police, Schools (North America does not have a tradition of church / Christian schools), Adoption Agencies etc. are increasingly welcoming faith communities in to partnerships, even when coming with a clear Christian commitment. This is not universal but there are quite a few stories where good practice has developed that meet both secular and Christian expectations. There may be many issues to further explore here, but sufficient now to note and welcome.
13. **Supporting structures**. To keep pace with the churches response to needs in the local community, structures have been developed in the new networks. This is necessary to support the movement especially when finance, administration and employment are involved. Some large city networks have their own organisations. The *New York City Leadership* is large enough for example, to have a president and staff, as well as 'directors' and 'departments'. Wealthy individuals support the structure - the cost of hosting and managing *Movement Day*, for example, must be quite significant. In England new movements have a light structure but still need staff and a structure to support the growing work.
14. **'Agencies' or 'Ministries' support the networks** and often provide cohesion to the movement and an identity for a particular piece of work. These can be local or a 'franchise' of a national network. In the UK we are used to *Street Pastors*¹² and *Trussell Trust*¹³, in USA examples were *Luis Palau Association* and *Not on My Watch*.
15. **The networks are generally 'bottom-up'** and linked through the local church leader, pastor or minister. Little reference or presence of regional or national leaders has been evident in the meetings I have attended, except the Archdeacon of Manchester was present in a recent planning meeting for *Gather North*, the next conference of We Gather in England.¹⁴
16. **Lay Leaders**. On both sides of the Atlantic it is noticeable how some of the key leaders are not church leaders but lay. Some are Christian business people or leaders in secular

¹² <http://www.streetpastors.org/>

¹³ <http://www.trusselltrust.org/>

¹⁴ www.wegather.co.uk

contexts, and sometimes they are individuals from a congregation who have felt a call to co-ordinate.

17. **'Second generation'**. I was surprised to hear both in England and America that there is an issue arising in the new movements about 'second generation' and passing on the vision of community transformation to a new generation of church leaders. This was mentioned twice at the Gather conference in England, and at the start of *City Advance* when we were invited to pray with the person next to us about their hope and prayer. The person I prayed with immediately said his prayer was 'handing it on to the next generation'.

Contrast

1. **The USA context is strongly evangelical and 'visible'**. The numbers of churches that can form networks range from 20-200 (1500 in New York on their *Prayer Concert* list). Evangelical Christian faith (rather than church buildings) are also more visible than in England with T Shirts, TV channels etc. I saw a bill board in the street advertising 'Talent for Christ / Apply this month' which this would not be seen in England!
2. **The churches in the USA networks seem to be quite independent** of each other and not linked through denominations as we know them in England. This may go with being evangelical which often means more 'congregational'. Many call themselves 'independent' and 'non-denominational' and only linked to each other if a 'church plant'. I met a leader of one of these who was supported by the sending church for 12 months with a salary and then expected to be self-supporting and independent.
3. **Denominational national and regional USA church leaders were absent**. Reflecting the evangelical / congregational it may be that the USA context is not strong in terms of regional church leaders. Apart from 'Movement' leaders, I did not hear of any engagement with denominational structures. Individuals like Tim Keller were described as 'Presbyterian' but there was little reference to the wider network or leadership. I was interested that we met for *City Advance* in a Presbyterian Church and *Alcoholics Anonymous* was taking place in the hall below where we meeting - without any reference to it being a similar example of 'serving community needs together'. The *Salvation Army* was/is a 'movement' and I was surprised there was no stated recognition or connection made. In England, many national and regional church leaders see mission and evangelism as key and support the new movements even if not organising them. It would be interesting to hear from Glenn Barth or Tom White if this brief observation reflects their considerable experience.
4. **'City' Movement in USA**. The stories and examples of movements in North America were from cities and the first conference was called *City Advance*. Although the new movements in UK are generally 'city', several are smaller areas and some cover rural (eg around Chester). A large number of the 2,600 *Churches Together* groups in England are also rural and town contexts rather than 'city'. However, the same principles of *City Advance* and *Movement Day* are evident as many groups of churches together are mission driven to serve the needs of the local community with a similar agenda of 'community transformation'. In addition, *Hope* is a major initiative in England which networks many local movements alongside *Churches Together* and *We Gather* - its logo includes the phrase 'in our villages, towns and cities'.
5. **'Church' tradition in England is centuries old**. This brings its own issues and reminds me of an old adage about organisations that 'begin with a 'Man' who starts a 'Movement', which becomes a 'Machine', and ends a 'Monument'. We do have some redundant church

buildings in England that are certainly monuments, but more often we have churches and mission agencies vacillating between still being a movement and becoming a machine. This will become an issue in USA too as the movements are sometimes second generation, but in England we have some movements like *Salvation Army* and *Church Army* doing 'transformation mission' and more than a hundred years old. We also have education and medical foundations centuries old that still provide an important contribution to word and deed mission today.

6. **'Churches Together' and 'Evangelical Alliance' networks.** While at *City Advance* and *Movement Day* I heard no reference to the kind of networks that have been long standing in England. Some *Evangelical Alliance* networks are a century old, and *Churches Together in England* evolved out of the *British Council of Churches* that goes back to the 1940s. At *Movement Day* there was a video from Youth for Christ and reference to the *American Bible Society* as agencies in mission, but I wasn't aware of other long standing inter church networks as we have them in England.
7. **Global Strategy Movement.** Although not referenced very often from the main stage, there was a stream for one of the workshops on 'Global Strategy'. The phrase is also on the *Movement Day website* and some of the local pastors telling their story included 'global' in their vision statement. This is a phrase that does not surface much in the English context, apart from the title of some 'Black Pentecostal' churches. *City Advance* and *Movement Day* are linked to the 'Global Strategy' stream of the Lausanne Movement. With the strong evangelical tradition I wonder if the links are stronger in USA, especially as 'city' focussed, whereas in England we are focussed on our local communities without a global dimension or aspiration.
8. **Size.** The New York 'movement' is huge and an operation to run a conference for 1500 people in a city centre hotel ballroom must require a significant budget. We heard stories of \$1m contract being given to the churches movement in one city and a whole hotel being given to another for outreach work. There are staff and buildings associated with 'new movements' in England but only *Transform Newham* has several full time staff as I am aware. None of our networks operate with staff, building and finance on the scale of the North America experience (– note this point relates to 3, 4 and 5 above where the 'movement' work is being done in other and more widespread ways).
9. **Issues.** I was very struck by some of the similar issues and initiatives like schools, adoption and trafficking, but realise there are several issues which have come to define the English 'movement' experience. I think for many cities in England this began with *Street Pastors* and *Night Time Initiatives*¹⁵ which was not mentioned at all in New York. Our context is further defined by *Food Banks* and the work of networks and local charities like the *Trussell Trust*. There were some references to food distribution in NY – however, in England this is very significant even in many rural towns and has captured national press headlines.
10. **Celebration.** As an Englishman in America for the first time I was very struck by the poverty described in some of the stories as a major driver as most movements seemed to be identified as responding to social need. This would be true too in England, but we have also embraced 'celebration' – notable with *Open Crowd Community Festivals* which marked the *Queens Jubilee* weekend and *Big Lunch initiative*, as well as the *2012 Games* in places not

¹⁵ <http://www.sa-cni.org.uk/index.html>

marked by being particularly poor. We continue to engage with sport with the forthcoming Rugby World Cup under the initiative *Engage 2015*¹⁶. Church networks with sports clubs, schools and community groups will form new partnerships for 'community transformation'. Although illustrated in the *Movement Day* story of the school transformation from the head teacher and local ministers, 'Celebration' itself was not a word I heard used at *City Advance* or *Movement Day* – it would be interesting to hear if this is an aspect of the new unity networks for mission in future stories from *City Advance*.

Conclusion

RE 'Community transformation' and the 'unity agenda'.

Reflecting on all of the above I'd like to conclude with a comment about the two phrases often used eg 'community transformation' and the 'unity agenda' regarding the relationship between them. 'Transformation' is a theological term with social significance. It lines up with other agencies and networks that care for local communities, out of which partnerships and projects form.

With a focus on the local community rather than the church, the unity agenda accelerates and is seen to make a difference, both in the church and the world. The unity agenda of the churches working together is both a means by which local communities are transformed and a consequence of it. When neighbouring churches are praying 'Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven' and answer that prayer in service and mission, they naturally come together with a common purpose - even if they have very different views of theology and tradition. Unity focussed on community and the coming kingdom of God is one which sets a new agenda for the church and one which deserves continuing dialogue for all who follow Jesus and seek the transformation for which he and we pray.

Follow up to this discussion paper

As indicated in the heading banner and introduction, this is a discussion paper. Comments are welcome therefore, and the way I propose we do that is by email and a follow up paper available in a months' time that collates any of the comments readers would like to make. These may be headings or considered responses, but each will be available on the web page where this paper will be kept for reference: www.cte.org.uk/newmissionmovements

Comments please to jim.currin@cte.org.uk by January 31st 2015

The follow up report will be available in CTe-News in February 2015.

Next event: *GatherNorth*

As I write this paper plans are well advanced by Roger Sutton and the Evangelical Alliance for a conference in England called *GatherNorth*. This will bring together a wide variety of people from the new movements for mission from the north of England in Manchester 3rd / 4th March 2015. I am pleased to be involved a little and Roger is encouraging anyone from Churches Together groups with a passion for mission and the north of England to attend too. For more information and booking : <http://www.wegather.co.uk/news/Gather-North-March-2015.cfm>

¹⁶ <http://www.engage2015.co.uk/>

Personal note

This paper is only a snap shot and a collection of headlines. I am acutely aware that I was a 'guest' at City Advance and Movement Day as I was not representing one of the new movements either were designed for. Although the purpose in attending was to hear the stories of the network leaders gathered together for this annual event, I am also aware that a conference (by its very nature) is removed from the reality it presents and even videos cannot do justice to the work on the ground. Further my encounter with the people who came together was only for 3 days so I could not get a full picture however hard I tried to network and listen. The growing significance of the new movements for mission however deserves considerable reflection, prayer and further action. In acknowledging the caveats, I hope much more work will be done in this area especially in bringing together the movements, agencies, churches, colleges, and other networks that all share the same prayer of Jesus in John 17.

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