

Working out our calling in **towns and cities**

Responses to the Government's Urban White Paper

Introduction

Suggestions for use

This booklet can be used as a straight discussion guide, working through all or some of the four sections.

It can be thinned down for use with an evening group, or supplemented, perhaps with local speakers on particular issues, for a Circuit Day. It could be used as part of a stewardship campaign or the *Our Calling* process to help focus thinking on the future of your church.

A worship planning group could use it in conjunction with books such as *'Worship and Where we Work'* (see resources). A youth group could combine the mapping exercise with a vision for 2020, and a vision if God was in charge of the planning department.

People with particular interest in or concern for Public Affairs could use it to spark engagement with local and national politics.

*And let us know any other ideas you have!
(See contact details on back page)*

Where do you live?

Whilst the word 'urban' may conjure up images of the inner city, the vast majority of the population of England is urbanised. Eight out of 10 people live in towns, cities or suburbs with populations of more than 10,000, although these only cover 7% of the land. Our experiences of urban life are very different. Some may live in an urban housing estate or a city centre, others a modern suburb or an ancient town. Some areas are highly prosperous with rising house prices, others may be economically depressed with houses lying abandoned. In most prosperity and deprivation are to be found cheek-by-jowl. Urban areas face similar issues, but in different forms – transport, housing, employment, crime, noise, litter – and their differences require differing solutions. One size certainly won't fit all.

Churches are often at the physical heart of towns or cities. They can be the last remaining public building on housing estates, or can be one of the first gathering points in new developments. Members of the congregation are members of the community, and experience the excitement, stress, convenience, hassle, colour, and weariness of urban living.

The Government has recently tried to pull together a strategy which is sensitive to the differing requirements of our towns and cities, but which provides a vision for an Urban Renaissance. The Urban White Paper brings together a short analysis of the current issues, outlines the areas where the Government is taking action or intends to act, and gives a loose timetable for the implementation of changes.

This booklet aims to help a church group to reflect on how the issues in the Urban White Paper might affect them, their area and their church through:

- carrying out a mapping exercise of the local area
- examining how government policy relates to what is going on locally
- looking at Biblical perspectives on city living
- examining the implications for our lives and the life of our church

The Government's White Paper on urban issues mainly covers England, as the issues concerned are largely devolved in Wales and Scotland to the Assembly and the Parliament.

SECTION 1

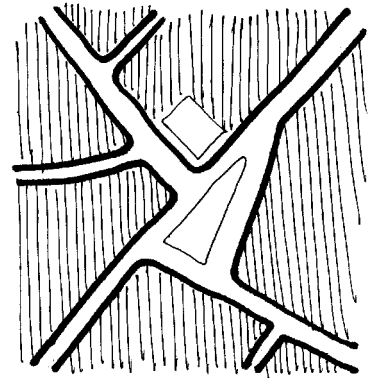
What does it mean to live in an urban area?

Ask the group to brainstorm on their understanding of the terms 'urban', 'rural' and 'suburban'. Into which area/areas does their church or community fall? Which words come to mind about urban living – good and bad? (You might like to reinforce the message that 'urban' means far more than inner city.)

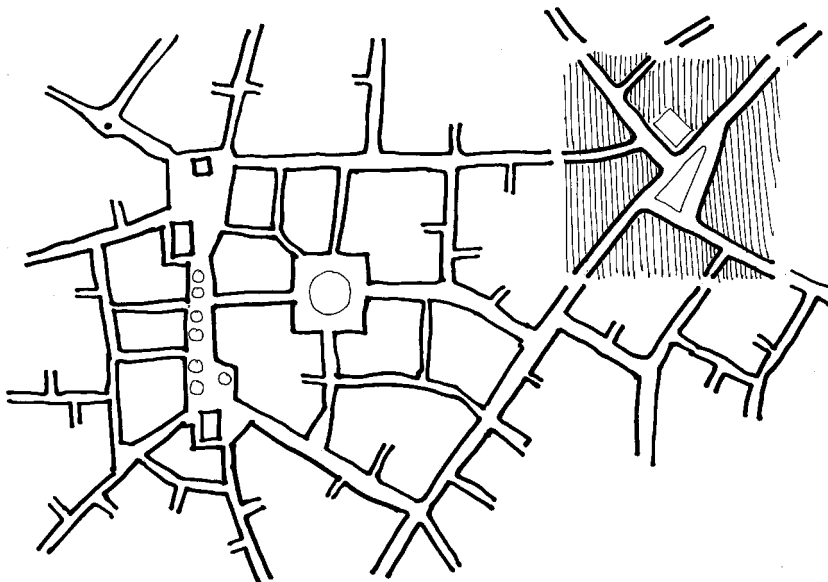
Mapping

Trace or copy a map of the area around your church – this area might be the 'natural constituency' where most church members live. Show significant roads in the area, and make several large copies. Divide into small groups and ask each group to mark on their map one of the following:

- Housing – where is it? What type is it – terraces, flats etc? What tenure is it – privately owned, council, rented? How have things changed?
- Where are the centres of employment – shops, offices, manufacturing? What kind of jobs are available? How have things changed?
- Services – where are the shops, the hospitals, the doctor's surgery, the transport routes, the schools and the education institutions? How have things changed?
- Leisure – where can people spend their leisure time – cinemas, bingo, cafes, restaurants? Do they require different levels of income? How have things changed?
- Churches – size? Denomination? Activity? Ecumenical co-operation? How have things changed?



Give each group 10 - 15 minutes to brain-storm their topic and to colour in/annotate their map. Place these round the room and encourage analysis of the area around your church. How do individuals and the church interact with it? What aspects of the area have changed recently, and why? (You could try to 'unpick' our own responsibility for change – did 'they' destroy the corner shop, or did 'we' prefer to shop at the supermarket?) Are any areas in need of 'regeneration', and what is required?



Produce a map of a larger area – perhaps of the whole city or town. Get a few people to draw how they relate to this larger map. Do they go to shop in the centre? Do they commute to work? Do they visit relatives or friends in other parts of the town? Discuss briefly how well they know the town, how cosmopolitan it is, whether there are any striking differences within the area.

Finally draw up a list of, say, five to ten key issues that have come out of your mapping exercise. These will act as a 'checklist' to help the group to relate the Government's plans to their local area in the next section.

If you have longer to look at these issues, you could send the groups out to walk around the local area, and draw up their maps on their return

If you have access to the internet you might like to try getting hold of an aerial map of your area for interest – try www.streetmap.co.uk or www.multimap.com

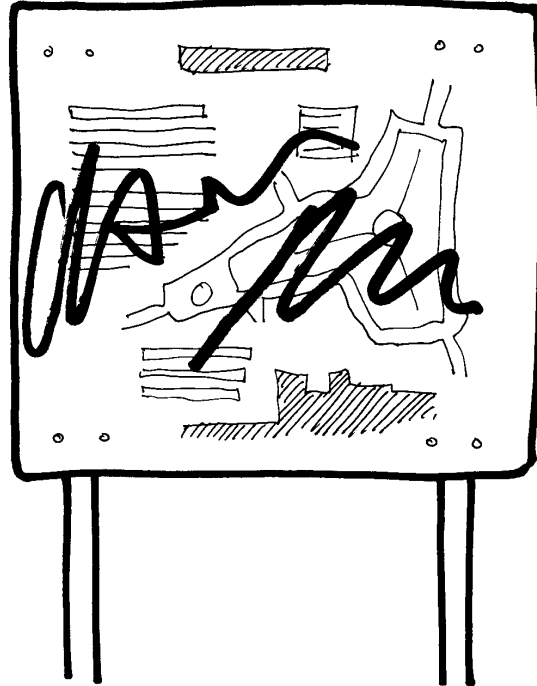
Over the next four pages are details of the Government's urban strategy, together with some questions. Divide into at least four groups to discuss these questions in the light of the issues raised in your mapping exercise.

SECTION 2

Government policy, local reality?

A. Local involvement

The criticism of many regeneration schemes in the past is that they have been 'top down', imposed on people by those who are supposedly in the know. "You need a new park/new roofs on the towerblock/a new shopping arcade." But there has been little consultation, and money has been spent on inappropriate changes. As a result they have often not been wanted or needed, and have resulted in vandalism or a sense of frustration. Over the last decade, the attempt has been to involve the local community in regeneration, but there is still a long way to travel from 'consultation' to 'participation'. Across the country the levels of people voting in local elections have dropped off dramatically, most visibly in densely populated urban areas.



The Government's vision:

- **Radical reform of local councils** – introducing directly elected mayors and cabinet government
- Placing duties on local authorities **not just to consult residents, but to involve them** – through 'community planning' exercises involving planners and residents; community strategies showing 'masterplans' for local areas
- **More funding for areas in greatest need** provided through 'New Deal for Communities' and 'Neighbourhood Renewal Fund' which require partnerships to be set up between local authorities, businesses, voluntary organisations, etc
- Consultation on extension of New Opportunities Fund to enable local communities to fund their ideas for **improving the environment**.

Questions

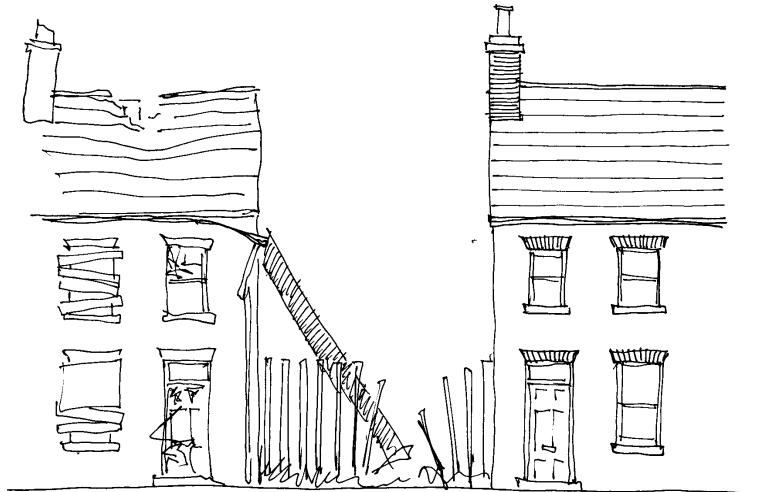
- What do people feel involved in their local communities? Who is? Who isn't? What are the barriers to involvement, both in community activity and in the political structures? What could be done to help?
- Are some groups or people easier to consult than others? Why? How can local authorities or national government ensure that involvement and consultation is more inclusive or representative?
- Young people are often seen as a threat to be contained, rather than having gifts to offer. Is this true in your area? How could young people be involved in the future of their local area?
- Has your area had experience of local partnerships, perhaps for a Single Regeneration Budget or National Lottery bid? Was your church involved? What were your experiences, good and bad? Have you been consulted about anything?
- How far do you feel these proposals will meet the need for increased local involvement in your particular situation?

FACTS

- **80% of people live in towns and cities, but these occupy just 7% of the land.**
- **There will be up to 3.8 million extra households by 2021. Whilst the population is estimated to grow by 7% between 1996 and 2021, the number of households is expected to grow by 19%**

B. Creating a better urban environment

Buildings and the environment around you affect how you feel about where you live. Derelict land or housing, badly designed buildings or poorly maintained parks or facilities can affect levels of satisfaction about urban living. A lot of



resources are wasted. At the moment land equivalent to the size of the West Midlands conurbation is vacant, derelict or available for development. Around 225,000 homes have been standing empty for over a year, often because they are in poor condition or in areas where the demand for housing is low. If these resources were better used, the pressure to build on "greenfield" sites would be lessened. At the same time the urban environment could be much improved by the redevelopment of derelict land and buildings, as well as better design and maintenance in our towns and cities.

The Government's vision:

- **Better planning and design** – better delivery of planning responsibilities; improving the skills of designers and developers to design sustainably and sensitively; strengthening guidance against new out-of-town shopping centres; developers may be required to pay 'impact' fees
- **Bring empty homes or previously developed land back into use** – proposed exemption from stamp duty for all property transactions in disadvantaged areas; tax advantages for cleaning up contaminated land; VAT reforms to encourage the conversion of properties for residential use; allowances to create flats over shops; the creation of 12 more "Urban Regeneration Companies" to kick-start and co-ordinate local regeneration
- **Look after the existing urban environment better** – plans to make streets safer, cleaner and more attractive; proposed reduction of VAT on repairs to historic churches; funding provision of parks and public spaces, including the development of a Green Flag Award for excellence (along the lines of the Blue Flag awards for beaches); encouraging people to cycle or use public transport

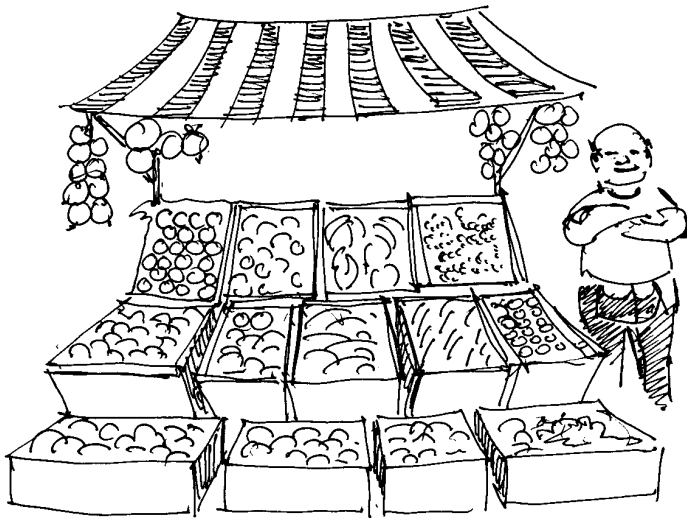
Questions

- What are the issues that affect the built and natural environment around you? How do they affect your/others' perceptions of the place?
- Are you aware of any empty homes? Could they be brought back into use and, if so, how?
- It would be easy to run the government if there was no limit on public expenditure. Paying less tax generally means there is less available for public services. Many of the proposals involve offering tax breaks in order to encourage socially useful behaviour. What is your response to this? Where should the balance lie?
- How far do you feel these proposals will meet the need for an improved urban environment in your particular situation?

FACTS

- The last few decades have seen a decline in manufacturing in urban areas, alongside a rise in service industries and flexible employment often outside main cities.
- 40% of vehicle mileage is done in built-up areas, and half of the emissions of airborne particles take place in urban areas. People are increasingly travelling further to work and to access services.

C. Enterprise and prosperity



Enterprise and prosperity have sometimes been thought of as dirty words in a church setting. But many of us are involved in wealth creation in our daily lives, and the church puts resources into supporting industrial or workplace chaplains working with industry and business. Economic changes or weaknesses have resulted in unemployment affecting whole generations, social hardship and a waste of potential. Enabling economic growth, and ensuring that it contributes to a rise in prosperity across the board, is key to encouraging people to remain in towns and cities and helping them to thrive there.

The Government's vision:

- Increase in funding for **Regional Development Agencies** (covering eight English regions), to further economic development locally, to promote business efficiency and employment, and to enhance the development of skills – including a new regional innovation fund.
- Include '**enterprise education**' in the National Curriculum
- Reduce **traffic congestion** which hampers business efficiency and improve public transport
- Appointment of a **Minister for Corporate Social Responsibility** to make the business case for business engagement in corporate social responsibility
- Ensuring that more people have **access to the internet** through 'UK Online Centres' – some of which might be sited in churches
- Possible '**Community investment Tax Credit**' to encourage private investment in both not-for-profit and profit-seeking enterprises in under-invested communities

Questions

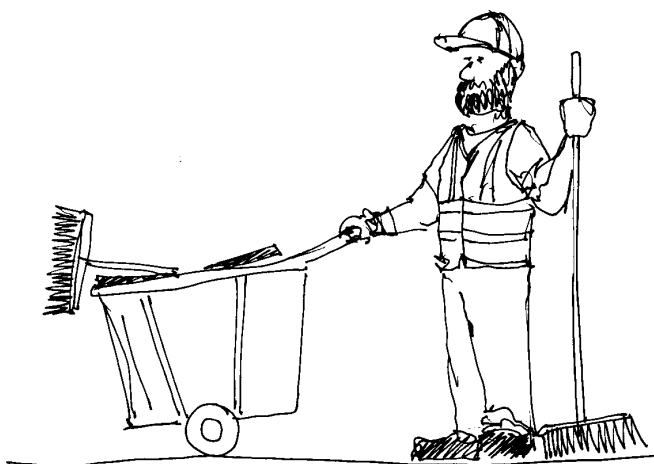
- How would you describe your local economy? Are there factories, established businesses, new small enterprises, shops, service industries? How has it changed recently? How do you feel it compares to other places in your region of the country or nationally?
- Urban renaissance will often be achieved by 'gentrification' – bringing in the people to buy and do up the houses, set up the businesses, invest in the social and cultural life, open bars and entertainment, spend the money. Cities can be great places to live in – if you can afford it. How can an urban renaissance be meaningful for everyone who lives in towns and cities?
- How far do you feel these proposals will meet the need for increased enterprise and prosperity in your area? What would need to happen before you (or your friends or family) would have the courage, confidence and cash to leave the dole queue and set up on your/their own?

FACTS

- Urban migration increases the pressure on rural areas – there is greater demand for housing in rural areas, threatening greenfield sites and raising house prices. There is a rise in the amount of commuting and car-use. The exodus from urban areas also results in the phenomenon of 'residualisation' – those who can afford to move away from an area do so. This creates a vicious circle of deprivation, as an area continues to decline.

D. Good quality services

People's quality of life is clearly related to the services they receive in urban areas – schools, healthcare, housing, law and order, and leisure, for example. People in urban areas – frequently those who are more disadvantaged – can often live in fear of crime and with poor services. The standard of services also affects whether businesses decide to locate in certain towns, and can contribute to people's decision to remain in towns or move away.



The Government's vision:

Continuing Government programmes to improve education standards, health and health equality, action against drugs and crime, housing, transport, and culture. These are nationwide but will impact on urban areas particularly regarding:

- The proposed 'Starter Homes Initiatives' which will enable **'key workers'** such as police or teachers to afford to live in areas where there is a great pressure on housing;
- A target that all **social housing** should be of a decent standard by 2010
- The 'Excellence in Cities' project is aimed at **improving standards in schools** in major cities
- Establishment of the **'Neighbourhood Renewal Fund'** targeted at local authorities in the most deprived areas
- The 'Sure Start' programme aimed at promoting the physical, emotional, intellectual and social development of **pre-school children**
- 'Health Action Zones' to tackle **health inequalities** and the social and economic causes of ill health; as well as refurbishment and building of hospitals
- **'Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships'** involving the police, local authorities, probation services and others
- Funding of projects in crime hotspots to **reduce domestic burglary**
- 'Creative Partnerships' to ensure that every school pupil in targeted deprived areas has **access to cultural and creative opportunities**.

Questions

- What is your personal experience of public services in your area? Do you think other people or groups in society have different experiences? Why, and what is your response?
- The Government has the aim of ending child poverty over 20 years. What national or local changes would make the biggest differences to the lives of children and young people living in poverty?
- How do people's experiences of different services impact on each other – for example if an area has high levels of bad housing, what is the likely impact on the local health service?
- How far do you feel these proposals will meet the need for improved public services in your particular situation?

FACTS

- People are leaving towns and cities – between 1991 and 1997 there was an estimated net exodus of 90,000 people each year.
- There is a poorer quality of life and lack of opportunities on average in urban areas, with lower educational performance, higher crime and levels deprivation, worse health and mortality. These are combined with high levels of prosperity.
- In 1996 five million houses in urban areas - or 32% - were classified as below set standards of decency.

SECTION 3

Seeking a Biblical perspective

The Bible knows nothing of light railways or superstores, but cities often feature in its pages. You might wish to explore what these cities have to say to the issues we wrestle with today. To start you off, here are seven Biblical cities with distinctive features.

Sodom – the wicked city

This was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had the pride that goes with food in plenty, comfort, and ease, yet she never helped the poor in their need. They grew haughty and committed what was abominable in my sight, and I swept them away, as you are aware. Ezekiel 16:49-50

Sodom was famously condemned for sexual practices – and less famously for economic inequality. Cities as concentrated engines of wealth creation have provoked the Church's wrath in more recent times. The City of London is often portrayed as a cesspit of greed. Yet our Victorian forebears had few hang-ups about Christians growing rich.

- *Do you think big is always ugly when it comes to economic activity?*

Laodicea – the clever city

You say, "How rich I am! What a fortune I have made! I have everything I want." In fact, though you do not realise it, you are a pitiful wretch, poor blind and naked. I advise you to buy from me gold refined in the fire to make you truly rich, and white robes to put on to hide the shame of your nakedness and ointment for your eyes so that you may see. Revelation 3:16-17

The jibes against Laodicea played on the city's fame as a banking centre, a processing centre for fine wool, and as a medical centre specialising in eye treatment. It was a striking example of how the city draws to itself talent, ingenuity and success.

- *How have you benefited from services only available in cities?*

Corinth – the cosmopolitan city

After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, and his wife Priscilla; they had recently arrived from Italy because Claudius had issued an edict that all Jews should leave Rome. Paul approached them and, because he was of the same trade, he made his home with them; they were tent makers and Paul worked with them. Acts 18:1 – 3

As a trade cross-roads, Corinth embraced cultures and religious attitudes as diverse as we find in cities today.

- *Should we try to mould a diverse urban community around a common culture or accept that different groups will live by different precepts?*

Jericho – the collapsed city

So the trumpets were blown, and when the army heard the trumpets sound, they raised a great shout, and the wall collapsed. The army advanced on the city, every man straight ahead, and they captured it. Joshua 6:20

Cities may not look fragile but history shows calamity can strike. A shift in the world economy or a new invention can devastate the economic base. The top people in business know what a tightrope they walk and feel far more vulnerable than most of us realise.

- *How do we support those bearing heavy responsibility for employment and overall planning in the city?*

Babylon – the lawyers' city

They then went into the king's presence and reminded him of the edict. "Your majesty", they said, "have you not issued an edict that any person who, within the next thirty days, presents a petition to any god or human being other than your majesty is to be thrown into the lion-pit?" The king answered, "The matter has been determined in accordance with the law of the Medes and Persians, which may not be revoked." Daniel 6:12

Darius – and then Daniel – was trapped by the law of the Medes and the Persians. Centres of economic power need control and there are often calls for extra laws.

- *What do you think is the place for law? Is it the best way to regulate human communities?*

Nineveh – the forgiven city

The people of Nineveh took to heart this warning from God; they declared a public fast, and high and low alike put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh he rose from his throne, laid aside his robes of state, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes ... When God saw what they did and how they gave up their wicked ways, he relented and did not inflict on them the punishment he had threatened. Jonah 3:5,6 and 10

Nineveh changed her ways – to Jonah's surprise.

- *What signs do you see to suggest Christians and others are coming to terms with the particular challenges of the urban areas?*

New Jerusalem – the city of God

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple was the sovereign Lord God and the Lamb. The city did not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gave it light and its lamp was the Lamb. By its light shall the nations walk, and to it the kings of the earth shall bring their splendour. The gates of the city shall never be shut by day, nor will there be any night there. Revelation 21:22-25

The Bible's last city is a vision that transforms all time and space. God sits in judgement.

- *Does your Christian belief transform your approach to urban issues?*

SECTION 4

The Response of the Church

"The calling of the Methodist Church is to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission." **'Our Calling' (2000)**

Methodist churches are being encouraged to formulate their lives and mission along the lines of 'Our Calling', as summarised by the framework of Worship, Learning and Caring, Service and Evangelism. How could your church respond to the issues raised by urban living? Here are some suggestions for discussion in the framework of 'Our Calling'. Others may arise from earlier conversations.

Worship

- Are we able to bring the needs and concerns of your area before God in worship?
- Use the "Cities" bible study to reflect on biblical perspectives on aspects of cities and urban living.
- Are there ways in which we can adapt the worship life of the church to accommodate changing urban lifestyles – eg lunchtime meetings in town centres?

Learning and Caring

- Which local groups use your premises? Are there any other creative ways in which we can work with them?
- Are we aware of the difficulties that urban life can create for members of the church? How do we support them?
- Are there people who are active in the local community, or involved in local politics? Could we learn from them or support them?
- Paul expected other churches to support the hard-pressed church in Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1–3). What does "being in connexion" mean for relationships between "comfortable" churches and those in more

hard-pressed areas? What about the relationships between rural and urban churches?

Service

- Did the mapping exercise show that we need to learn more about our local community? Where could you find out more information?
- What issues has the discussion thrown up that we could pursue further with our local councillors or MP?
- Can we work with local or national groups on issues of particular concern to us – eg the Empty Homes Agency (Tel:020 7828 6288 or www.emptyhomes.com), Church Action on Poverty (Tel:0161 236 9321 or www.churchpoverty.org.uk), the Churches National Housing Coalition (0161-236-9321) or many others?
- Are there possible developments with which our church could be involved? Hosting a UK Online Centre? Training and Skills Courses? Local regeneration partnerships? Who would you need to contact to find out more?

Evangelism

- From the front steps onwards, just how welcoming is our church to members of the community?
- What can we learn from any work being done locally by industrial or workplace chaplains, or from chaplains in schools, or higher or further education institutions?
- Do our church structures help or hinder our work in urban areas? For example, cities often have "missions" where as more suburban or rural areas have churches. How does this affect our image of cities? Urban areas are often divided like a cake into several "wedge-shaped" circuits, with a single city centre church at the point of the wedge, with a larger number of suburban churches at the thick end. Is this true in your area? Does this affect the way central urban churches are able to work together?
- How can churches respond to the changing demography of urban areas to make more followers of Jesus Christ? Single person households are increasing - does church life revolve around family groups? If local populations have shifted, do we need to think about planting a new congregation?

For further information or more suggestions of resources, please contact Rachel Lampard, Secretary for Parliamentary and Political Affairs, Methodist Church House, 25 Marylebone Rd, London NW1 5JR Tel 020 7467 5298 Email: lampardr@methodistchurch.org.uk
For information on **industrial chaplaincy** contact John Ellis, Secretary for Business and Economic Affairs Tel: 020 7467 5297 Email: ellisj@methodistchurch.org.uk For information on how your **church impacts on the environment** contact Jennifer Potter, Secretary for International Affairs Tel 020 7467 5245 Email: potterj@methodistchurch.org.uk

Further resources

- Our Towns and Cities: the future – Delivering an urban renaissance (www.regeneration.detr.gov.uk or from Stationery Office bookshops)
- The Cities: A Methodist Report (NCH Action for Children, 1997, ISBN 0 900984 56 2)
- Touching the Pulse: Worship and Where we Work, Ed. Bernard Braley (Stainer and Bell 1996, ISBN 0 85249 831 4)
- The Methodist Church's Rural Mission Officer, Jenny Carpenter, will be producing similar information on the Government's recent Rural White Paper. Details from Jenny Carpenter, Arthur Rank Centre, National Agricultural Centre, Stoneleigh Park, Kenilworth, CV8 2LZ Tel: 02476 696969 Email: arthur.rank.centre@virgin.net

This material is also online at www.methodist.org.uk/responses

Written by Rachel Lampard. Cartoons by Steven Walker.

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