



Ecumenical Action in the Gorbals

John Harvey

The Gorbals area of Glasgow is not best known for ecumenical activity. Its reputation for gang violence, established through the 1935 novel *No Mean City*, was overtaken in the 1970s and 80s by a story of demolition and redevelopment, which in turn has been superseded by one of “regeneration”. Gorbals today, bounded by the Clyde, road developments and the edge of Rutherglen, is a mixture of well-designed new housing and supporting services, old high flats, and a population which still retains something of the cosmopolitan flavour of earlier decades.

The presence of institutional religious activity in this small inner city area of Glasgow is, to put it mildly, considerably reduced from previous years. Where there were once nearly a dozen Church of Scotland congregations in the whole area, now there is one, with a membership of fewer than 100. The Roman Catholic Church has not fared much better, being reduced from three huge parishes to one much smaller one. The presence in the area of the Central Mosque testifies to the considerable Muslim population who pass through; but both the Christian and the Muslim presences are dependent to a large degree on “gathered” congregations. It’s probably true to say that the majority of the population of around 10,000 have no active religious affiliation. And while the scale of things has changed dramatically since the middle of the last century, the truth of that last statement applied then as it does now; this has not really been an area of large scale institutional religious activity for a very long time.

It’s against this somewhat discouraging background, then, that this article seeks to outline two pieces of ecumenical activity in Gorbals; one in the third quarter of the twentieth century, the other in the first part of the twenty-first. Our family was part of the first one for eight years, and I have been involved with the second for the past three. Do not, therefore, expect objective analysis here; what I am offering is, I suppose, a personal account and a bit of ecclesiological reflection, nothing more.

The Gorbals Group Ministry, as it came to be called, did not begin as a conscious ecumenical activity, and that was never its main aim. In the middle 1950s, three young Church of Scotland ministers, two with families, came together in the Gorbals of that time to form an intentional community. Today, they would most likely be described as a Basic Christian Community.

The background to the Gorbals Group is found in two pieces of work from abroad. The French worker-priests of the 1940s, with their emphasis on “Christian presence” in industrial areas of France with a vast “unchurched” population; and the East Harlem Protestant Parish in New York in the 1940s and 50s, where a few young ministers and their families lived together, with strict discipline, in that very vulnerable and broken situation, “gossiping the gospel” on the streets and sidewalks, and setting up small store-front churches as they went.

In 1958, with the support of the Iona Community and the cautious permission of Glasgow Presbytery of the Church of Scotland, the Gorbals Group began. Their purpose was clear; to live in this decaying inner city slum, initially together but soon in separate tenement flats, sharing as far as possible the life of their neighbours, responding to local need, and making available the skills and training they had, in the service of the whole community. They never saw themselves as identifying completely with their neighbours – they recognised that their background, and the fact that they could leave at any time, prevented that. “Critical involvement” is perhaps a more appropriate phrase to describe how they saw their presence in the area.

They adopted, and adapted, the discipline of the East Harlem Protestant Parish; sharing all their money, living at National Assistance (i.e. basic benefit income) level, meeting each week in one or other of their homes for worship, support and business, around a shared meal. Within a very short space of time, they were drawn deeply into the issues affecting the community in which they lived: youth work, housing issues, political activity, and family and individual support work on a daily (and nightly) basis.

By the time we joined the Group, in 1963, the ecumenical aspect of its life had developed. Well before the Group began, a Scottish Episcopal Church worker had been active, living in the area and attached to the small Episcopal congregation. By 1963, both she and the local Episcopal Priest-in-charge of the congregation, with his wife, had become members. Sharing Communion together, as we did every Thursday evening, never presented any problem, as far as I remember – we just did it, and it felt entirely proper to do so, as a vital expression of our common life. Such struggles as we had tended to centre on the more contentious, and dare I say more important, issues like money, political activity, and our response to the social needs of the neighbourhood. These were often the source of long debates late into the night – sometimes resolved satisfactorily, sometimes not.

The Gorbals Group continued until the mid-1970s. Members came and went – we moved on in 1971 – and of course the demolition and redevelopment of the area brought huge changes. The Group's effect on the institutional life of the church there was never strong. The original vision, drawn from East Harlem, of the setting up of small store-front congregations never materialised – in part due to the divided and sectarian history of the churches, but also in part due to the focus of the Group, which shifted very quickly, under the huge pressure of the place, to a different agenda.

Ecumenically, however, one or two pointers seem to me to be clear. Engagement in, and commitment to, a demanding common task quickly sorts out priorities; sharing bread and wine is *essential and given*, the real struggles centre on the much harder *lifestyle choices* that need to be faced each day. Living together, and being dependent on each other, is the only real basis for unity, whether it be of individuals or of churches; working out what it means, and formulating that into institutional form, may or may not emerge as things proceed. That didn't happen with the Gorbals Group, because that never was the intention in the first place; that doesn't mean to say that there aren't ecumenical lessons to be learnt.

Perhaps there are other lessons. A lot of enthusiasm, and energy, has been generated recently, within the Church of Scotland, by the concept of a “church without walls”. Many within the church, and even some outside it, seem to have seized on this concept as a liberating idea – a vision of a different sort of church, really responding both to the radical demands of the Gospel and to the urgent needs of the world. The institution’s response, though, has been predictably ... institutional! Yet another restructuring of central committees, on which the jury’s verdict is still out; and a singular failure on the part of Presbyteries to encourage new and diverse expression of church within their bounds. Yet as long ago as the mid-1960s, Bishop John Robinson drew our attention to the following distinction, from an American source:

Experimental ministries, with all their variations, share one assumption that the essential form of Christian mission and ministry is known. All presuppose some kind of congregation Many of the activities may take place apart from this gathering and may involve other than members; but the congregation is the center about which all aspects of the experiment revolve.

An exploratory ministry on the other hand, presupposes no form at all. The exploration is entered into precisely because those who undertake it do not presume to know in advance what the structures appropriate to ministry in the urban-industrial culture may be.¹

Update this comment to the post-industrial world of the twenty-first century, and broaden its application to the whole church instead of simply to ministry, and it seems to me that something important is being said here about finding new ways of actually *becoming*, as distinct from *envisioning*, a “church without walls”. An offering from the Gorbals Group, as an *exploring* form of being church, to the church of today, may be to suggest a way to attempting to be that exploratory church – a risky business, and certainly as far as the Gorbals Group is concerned by no means an entirely successful one – but a signpost, a pointer, nonetheless.

Fast forward to 1998, to the “New Gorbals” that was now emerging, and the two remaining Christian congregations, small but energetic, with purposeful leadership. This was the year when the minister of Gorbals Parish Church (Church of Scotland) and the priest of Blessed John Duns Scotus Church (Roman Catholic) took practical steps to bring into existence the ecumenical project known as “Bridging the Gap”.

What they had in mind, as the Mission Statement they both came eventually to sign, was to:

celebrate our common work in the church and in the community project BRIDGING THE GAP, through which we aim to extend the work of the church in serving all God’s people in this place.

The vision here was clearly that of a serving church, crossing over denominational boundaries, and reaching out in practical ways to everyone with no distinction of religious affiliation, but in particular looking to bridge the clear gaps in the community – religious, denominational, educational, generational, and demographic. For there were plenty of these.

Before looking in more detail at what actually emerged from this initiative, we should note the next sentence in the Mission Statement of 1999. For they went on to say:

We pray that the church will find, in joyful obedience, the path by which God will bring us to fuller unity.

That, too, was an expression of a shared vision – that working together, the two congregations would slowly grow together, at both a personal and even, eventually, at a liturgical and sacramental level. So far, it must be said, this is still largely a vision. Personal relationships between members of the two congregations do exist, and are friendly. Shared activities do also take place; services, residential visits, events in Lent and at Christmas. So there is friendship, and there is mutual

recognition, and there is a certain amount of shared activity; all of which are matters for thanksgiving. Institutionally, however, the two congregations continue to live separate lives in their separate centres; in this, of course, they are no different from all their contemporaries throughout the city.

The project which the two congregations signed up to in 1998, however, has achieved considerable success and recognition, even beyond the bounds of Gorbals.

In 1998, Bridging the Gap was essentially the work of two part-time workers, funded by the churches and some Trusts, working out of a cupboard in the hall of the Catholic Church. Their first activity was within the local schools. By then, there were no Secondary schools left in the area, and only four small Primary schools, two Catholic, one non-denominational, and one Special school. The two workers, both very gifted in work with children, got permission to go into the Primary schools, where they used drama, music and art to enliven the pupils, and then to bring them (and their parents and grandparents, of course) together for special celebrations around Christmas and Easter.

Straight away, gaps began to be bridged, as the children discovered that they all knew the same new songs, could work together to put on their shows, and drew in the older generations to shared experiences. This soon attracted attention outwith Gorbals – the Church of Scotland’s Church and Nation Committee praised it, in one of its reports to the General Assembly, as “a model of anti-sectarian practice for the church to follow.”

The next two years saw an important development. Drawing on the experience of similar projects in London and Chicago, Bridging the Gap piloted a Peer Tutoring project in Gorbals. A small group of Secondary 4 pupils, from the two Secondary schools into which the Primary children from Gorbals had to feed, and who were identified by their teachers as being in danger of dropping out of school, agreed

to be trained by Bridging the Gap staff as tutors for a similar-sized group of Primary 7 pupils, who were identified by their teachers as being in danger of making a difficult transition from Primary to Secondary school. This pilot was very successful; so much so, that since then, the Peer Tutoring project has become established as an annual event, running from August to March each year, and requiring its own dedicated staff of two part-time workers and a budget of nearly £90,000. The project is managed in part by a locally-formed Youth Steering Group, although it falls under the overall responsibility of the Board of Bridging the Gap, now a charitable company.

The results have been very exciting. Working together; travelling together to residential events with the Corrymeela Community in Northern Ireland; discovering self-confidence and self-worth (so often sadly in short supply in areas like Gorbals); staying on in school to do Highers and thus have a better chance of employment; these are just some of the ways in which the success of this project can be measured.

And a further development is about to take place. Many of the Secondary pupils who have been involved with the project over the past three years, and who have now of course moved on, many leaving school, have wanted to remain connected with Bridging the Gap. So funding has been found to appoint a full-time worker to work with them in helping them to get involved in volunteering in the community, and in preparing for the world of work. More gaps being bridged!

While all this good work in the field of education, and in the lives of young people and their families, has been taking place, a new element has been appearing in the “New Gorbals”. These are the “New Glaswegians”; some of the thousands of asylum seeker and refugee families dispersed to Glasgow from the South east of England in a move which began in 2000, most of them bearing heavy burdens such as persecution, torture, trauma, and family breakdown, on top of the huge challenge of having to start again, however temporarily, in a new country, and with a foreign language.

When the first groups of asylum seekers and refugees arrived in Gorbals, the Gorbals Community Forum, of which Bridging the Gap was a part, decided to ask Bridging the Gap to be the lead agency in the area to make them welcome and seek to respond to their needs. Thus began another strand of the work of the project, requiring two more part-time staff, a full-time Project Co-ordinator, and of course increasing the fund-raising requirements to a quite considerable level! The asylum seeker and refugee staff now offer daily support for a large number of the 180 or so families in the area; run a weekly drop-in with 26 volunteers and the involvement of many of the local agencies; share in running English classes, offer a homework club, and are pioneering integration work in the local nursery school (you have to start that early to challenge the stereotypes!), and a citizenship programme for those seeking British passports.

Like so many similar projects throughout the city, Bridging the Gap, while tracing its origin to the initiative of the two local congregations, has of necessity developed a life, and a momentum, of its own. The congregations still support it, generously, both with what money they can afford, and also with people and with plant – both churches contribute personnel to the management and running of the project, and the Catholic Church provides free office accommodation, and hall space for the drop-in. Bridging the Gap is still an expression of the wish of the two congregations to “serve all God’s people in this place.” Whether it will, of itself, ever in the future help the two churches to find “the path by which God will bring us to fuller unity” is still an open question. But for now, it is indeed an opportunity for “joyful obedience” in ecumenical service, in Christ’s name, in Gorbals.

¹ John A.T. Robinson, *The New Reformation?* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 97.