

Review: *40 Years of Ministry in Liverpool*

Neville Black's memoir is much more than the record of a long and energetic parish ministry. It is the story of a theology being dismantled and reconstructed through sustained encounter with the people and communities of inner-city Liverpool.

Black arrived in Everton in 1964 equipped with the convictions and methods of conservative evangelicalism. Yet the realities he encountered—poverty, wholesale housing clearance, racial tension, institutional power and the distance between inherited church culture and working-class life—made some of those assumptions increasingly inadequate. The central movement of the book is consequently from a mission concerned primarily with saving individuals and bringing them into church towards an incarnational understanding of God already at work within communities.

One of Black's most important discoveries is that belonging may precede believing. Mission is therefore not principally something the Church does to people. It begins by noticing what God is doing, accepting what people offer and accompanying them as they take tentative steps towards a Christian community. This is the theological heart of the book and one of its lasting contributions to thinking about urban ministry. [Black describes that change particularly clearly in his account of St George's, Everton.](#)

The memoir is strongest when theology emerges from a particular incident. A local man offering to illuminate St George's for Christmas; the disagreement over whether a church social could include a bar, bingo and a raffle; tensions between established congregations and the surrounding community; and the sometimes-painful encounters between Black's working-class Liverpool identity and the predominantly middle-class Church of England all become material for theological reflection. These stories communicate more than an abstract textbook on urban mission could.

The book also provides a valuable social and ecclesiastical history of Liverpool between 1964 and 2004. It records the upheaval caused by the clearance of Everton's terraced communities, the formation of the St Luke in the City Team Parish, the Toxteth disturbances, growing Anglican–Roman Catholic cooperation and the emergence of community organisations addressing housing, poverty and racial injustice. The accounts of the Evangelical Urban Training Project, the Group for Urban Ministry and Leadership and Liverpool Housing Trust preserve an important history that might otherwise be lost.

Black emerges as what Sam Wells calls a “social and ecclesial entrepreneur”: instinctively looking for possibilities, creating partnerships and pressing institutions to change. But this is not a self-congratulatory memoir. Black acknowledges mistakes, impatience, clashes of personality and occasions when his enthusiasm placed pressure on others. His judgements of bishops and church leaders are sometimes sharp, particularly where he detects class prejudice or institutional caution. That

candour gives the narrative credibility, even where readers may reach different conclusions.

The most affecting strand is the presence of Val. She is not simply presented as “the vicar’s wife”, but as a partner in vocation whose counselling ministry, theological insight and courage profoundly shaped Black’s work. Her struggle with declining mobility, while sustaining a remarkably independent and fruitful ministry, brings tenderness and depth to the closing chapters. The final tribute to her gives the whole memoir an emotional centre.

The questions for reflection at the end of each chapter are an excellent feature. They transform the book from autobiography into a resource for clergy formation, ministry teams and church discussion groups. Questions about loss, calling, changing long-held beliefs and the relationship between being Christian and being fully human invite readers to examine their own stories rather than merely admire Black’s.

There are some weaknesses. The profusion of names, committees and organisations can occasionally overwhelm the central narrative, especially for readers unfamiliar with Liverpool Diocese. A future edition would benefit from a chronology, an index of people and organisations, and short explanations of bodies such as EUTP and GUMML. More rigorous copy-editing would also remove typographical errors and inconsistencies—including “Foreward”, “Nevile” in several places, irregular spacing and the differing versions of the title.

These defects do not diminish the book’s substance. *40 Years of Ministry in Liverpool* is an honest, warm and frequently humorous account of a priest whose understanding of the gospel was enlarged by the city he served. Its deepest message is that Christian ministry requires more than bringing a predetermined answer into a community. It demands remaining alongside people long enough for one’s own theology—and sometimes the Church itself—to be converted.

It deserves to be read not only as Neville Black’s personal memoir, but as a significant primary document in the history of post-war urban ministry in Britain.