**Urban Theology Union (UTU) and Sheffield Methodist District**

UTU a small, ecumenical organisation with Methodist roots, has a focus on Christian education around theology for discipleship and mission. It began in the 1970s based in NE Sheffield, delivering a study year for young people (from UK and USA) keen to experience inner city mission as well as explore their understanding of theology in that context. From that developed the first vocation doctoral level theology course in the UK, and a collegial pattern of study that works very well for part-time students. The **PhD course** is now run through Luther King Centre, Manchester, validated by University of Manchester. Students have mainly been Christians, but Jewish, Moslem and agnostic people have studied with us.

People who just want to **write a book**, rather than doing formal academic study, can also be supported to publication and three people have had books published with commercial imprints in the last year, and a further three are on the way for 2025. Rev Dr Neil Johnson, a Methodist Pioneer Minister helps to facilitate the group.

We have **never been an ordinary theological college**. UTU was for a while part of the Sheffield Inner City Ecumenical Mission Circuit and helped establish The Furnival as an outreach base. For around 15 years we trained Methodist Ministers (P and D) and delivered a short orientation course on Urban Mission open to all Connexional ministers newly stationed in such settings. Fruitful Fields ended that relationship.

Five years ago we revived **the study year** process, as a Certificate in Theology for Discipleship and Mission, a 10 day-session vocational course enabling people to explore how their favourite Bible passage might speak to them about what God was calling them to do in their local community. This course is now re-launched as three Modules of three Units and is renamed **Certificate of Mission 3vangelical for a Post-Christian World.** The key outcome of the course, as with the original study year is for the attender to be equipped to start up or take up a new role in outreach. It draws on the considerable body of work in the Kingdom Evangelism Pack produced during Covid lock-down – free on the UTU website.

We also put on specialist short courses such as ‘Living with Confidence and Respect with People of other faiths’ which delivered by Rev Gareth Jones whilst he was at Psalter Lane, and was very popular.

The Board has had three ex officio places for **Methodist representative**s – the District Chair, a minister from Victoria Hall (our home since the 2010s), and during the time when we had closer links with Connexion, a member of the training team. Our Directors until the 2010s were all Methodist Ministers, also serving Sheffield Circuit.

The move to Victoria Hall was meant to give us a re-focus on mission in the City Centre, but changes of minister at the church, the formation of The Foundry and the fact that two successive Directors of UTU have been based out of Sheffield, have all militated against that.

In late spring 24, we and the Presbyter at Victoria Hall were approached by the CEO of Freedom Project (Bolsover), as to whether we might **explore a new sort of mission** based at 35 Chapel Walk (a shop-front part of Victoria Hall) which is the church’s weekday outreach premises.

UTU’s role will be to partner in the training for Community Mission that Freedom want to deliver to people across the country. Just as exciting is the fact that we could also develop a sort of **base community** – a group for homeless or precariously housed people where we would teach them advocacy skills and bring in justice-focussed theology.

The Presbyter at Victoria Hall described it in this way in an email alerting The Foundry to this new venture:

“*I want to keep you informed about a conversation that has begun that will help us utilise the space and enable it to reach its potential.   We are in conversations with the Freedom Project and the UTU about the possibility of them joining the collaboration that already exists.  The vision is to further add to what is already going on by offering training and one to support for people in need in the city,   When someone who is vulnerable and maybe have challenges with addiction, they need further support about how to find a job, help with their English, and develop a sustainable lifestyle that will help them move up and move on.  This is alongside the addiction support and fellowship we already offer.  And we want to be able to offer training to others who want to be involved in [project based] mission.  The UTU and Freedom would like to partner with those of us already working together in the space to help to provide this.”*

**At this juncture the things I would like to explore are:**

1. How UTU with its vocational and contextual theology emphasis might help resource the District Intern scheme ?
2. What short course topics might the District like us to cover and help us promote ?
3. Is the vision for the three-way project at 35 something that the District might help seed-fund ? The costs to the Victoria Hall congregation are minor (in fact their will be savings as more of us will share the bills), but the moving of the UTU library and office into these premises (which would give us a much more flexible space to develop member events etc., and thus contribute to our longer term viability) will need external funding.
4. Any other ideas ?

Erica Dunmow

Chair UTU Sheffield July 2024