

If Unlock is the answer – what is the question?

An organisation like Unlock, which has been around for decades, needs to check, from time to time, that we still know what we are all about. Our mission statement, states that we are in the business of: -

**Unlocking stories of urban people
Revealing Good News of the Down to Earth Christ
Releasing life changing skills and confidence**

Unlock was founded over thirty years ago, by a group of Evangelical Church leaders, who had a concern for the inner city poor. In those days it was called EUTP (Evangelical Urban Training Project) and was set up, not for evangelicals to bash liberals or traditionalists, and not to patronise the working classes; but to say to evangelicals, “there's a whole mass (class) of people out there that just can't hear you, you speak *at* them not *with* them, and you use a language they don't understand, because it just isn't theirs - its OUR problem, not theirs! - and so, if you want to share good news with these children of God, you'd better learn how.” In other words, we have not done what Jesus would have done, if he came among us now, and we are going to try.

Since then, first EUTP, and now Unlock, have been about learning how; and making that way of learning, and some resources to go with it, available to the churches, especially the evangelical ones, but any others too. Our founders were particularly concerned that Christian Disciples, in deprived inner cities, and city estates, were being denied the chance to explore their growing faith *for themselves*, in ways that fit with their way of looking at life. There is now, as there was then, a vast array of resources for people who want to grow in Christian faith and discipleship. But in general those resources are alienating for urban working class people, because they use middle class vocabulary, middle class approaches, and middle class examples. The fear was that ordinary working class people were left feeling that learning about faith couldn't have much to do with them, because it wasn't presented in a style that related to their everyday lives and their way of looking at things.

Unlock founders quickly realised that there were different approaches, which were more comfortable, and appropriate, for people who, ‘can read but don't much’; people in whose homes there are few, if any, books. The temptation is to think that Bible study has to be dumbed-down for what Unlock came to term ‘Non-book culture’; but that assumption is both arrogant and wrong. Just because people do not think or learn in bookish ways, doesn't mean that they are less capable of thinking and learning; it just means that they have a different approach. Part of the problem is exactly that kind of unconscious assumption; that the kind of people Unlock work with, have sometimes been made (or allowed) to believe that they are not qualified to think theologically, and have nothing to contribute to exploring the Christian faith. *‘I'm nobody, no one will be interested in what I think, and I'm not very good at explaining’*

The truth is, that when you ask these urban disciples, to tell you their stories, or better yet encourage them to tell their stories to, and with, one another, and when there is real listening, we find stories of biblical values lived out; stories that have real resonance with the stories in the bible, and which provide a very fruitful source for theological reflection and new insights. Actually we find that the ‘bookish’ types have something to learn from listening to everyday, down to earth, Christians sharing their stories, and that certainly

we all have some new things to learn together. So Unlock are working in these ways to enable those Christians who live and worship in urban, and less wealthy, areas to have the confidence to interpret their faith and the bible for themselves, and then to share it appropriately *and* to challenge the way the church has traditionally communicated the good news.

Unlock has listened to the people we are concerned for, and has worked with them, to discover ways in which they can explore their faith for themselves; approaches which do not rely on reading lots of text, and do not rely on knowledge gained from book learning, but which draw on people's day to day experiences, and allow them to express their insights in creative ways. We have developed resources that are tailor made for urban disciples, but which also work quite well in a range of other environments, because they offer fresh ways of working with the bible, which value each person's story, and each person's ideas. Our Field workers, in UK cities, work to enable local leadership in Unlock approaches, so that we do not create another layer of dependency, but instead help local people to grasp the concept, and build their confidence that they can do it for themselves. Our national staff provide training for other organisations which are sending people into urban mission, so that they too are better equipped to – **Unlock the stories of urban people – enabling them to reveal Good News of the Down to Earth Christ – and release life changing skills and confidence.**

At its May meeting Council considered the question above, **'If Unlock is the answer – what is the question?'** Phrases which came up included

- empowering ordinary everyday Christians
- working class reaching working class
- resourcing urban discipleship
- setting people free
- telling stories
- upside down Bible study

It was clear from the discussion that Unlock's aim has been very consistent since its foundation over thirty years ago, and that what is probably unique to Unlock, given that many organisations would lay claim to some of these, is our focus on the Bible. Effectively Unlock are working at how to enable and encourage those in 'non-book culture' to engage with the content of – a book! specifically the Bible.

We need your support to continue to do that work, but please also consider whether we can be a resource to your faith, your church, your mission. If you have never tried an Unlock Bible study, perhaps now is the moment. A growing range is available to download free from our website www.unlock-urban.org.uk. We guarantee a refreshing approach to the Bible – money back if you are not totally satisfied!

Dawn Lonsdale (Unlock Chief Officer)