Anglicanism, Race and the Inner City: Parochial Domesticity and Anti-Racism in the Long 1980s

by David Geiringer and Alastair Owens

On the 4th July I received through the post a small package containing a matchbox: inside were a small bullet, an armband with a swastika, and a note saying ‘Your next caller may be your Maker, Father’. The note was signed ‘Column 88’ in blood, as far as I could tell.¹

Rev. Kenneth Leech to Commander Jim Neville, 1979

Reporting his latest death threat to Commander Jim Neville of the Anti-Terrorist Squad in July 1979, Rev. Kenneth Leech (1939–2015) wryly explained that this was not the first time he had been targeted by neo-Nazi terrorists – ‘I collect a fair number of these!’; he informed Neville.² Leech, rector since 1974 of the inner-city...
parish of St Matthew, Bethnal Green, had been deeply involved in the fight against the National Front and other fascist groups in the East End of London for several years. This particular threat followed an article published in the *East London Advertiser* the previous week which reported his forceful denunciation of the National Front’s increasing presence in an area that had a growing Bangladeshi population. Against a backdrop of mounting tensions around immigration at both local and national level, Leech had been an outspoken, insistent and prolific advocate of harmonious ‘race relations’ and ethnic diversity. He was someone who instinctively put his faith into action, always standing on the side of the oppressed. In 1974, with Rowan Williams (future Archbishop of Canterbury) and others, he co-founded the Jubilee Group – an international network of Christian socialists. He also founded the homeless charity Centrepoint (1969), established a number of anti-racist groups both within and without the Anglican Church, and from 1987 to 1991 was Director of the Runnymede Trust (founded 1968 to promote research into multi-ethnic Britain). These positions never took him far from the East End. Indeed, during his Runnymede tenure, he relocated the office to Princelet Street so that it would be in Bengali Spitalfields. Leech eventually established himself as a community theologian, a position which enabled him to combine writing a stream of books and pamphlets outlining his radical contextual theology with an uncompromising commitment to, and solidarity with, a diverse local population.

Leech’s politics and profile made him a target for paramilitary neo-Nazi organizations such as Column 88. Operating between 1970 and the early 1980s, Column 88 started to hold meetings and rallies in the Bethnal Green Road area of Leech’s parish. The notorious *Blade Bone* pub in Bethnal Green Rd, frequented in the 1930s by Oswald Mosley and his brownshirts, was now the hub of Column 88 activities. The growing local Bengali community was the target of racist violence and murders, notably that of Altab Ali in May 1978. Politically and geographically, Leech was at the centre of a racist, blood-stained conflict seen by some as a battle over Britain’s national identity.

Leech was not the only inner-city cleric confronting the increasingly conspicuous forces of racism and xenophobia at the turn of the decade. Following the 1981 house fire in New Cross (SE London) which killed thirteen young black people, 20,000 demonstrators marched through London as part of the ‘Black People’s Day of Action’ to express their anger at police (and media) indifference to ‘racism, injustices and the plight of black Britons’. Addressing the march in Fordham Park on the 2nd March 1981, Rev. Wilfred Wood did something that few Anglican clergy could: he spoke in the first person when articulating anti-racist ideas:

Now, whatever the racists may think, God made us black people as we are, to be as we are, and we are not going to commit mass suicide, or withdraw to some overseas reservations simply to indulge those who want an all-white Britain.

Migrating from Barbados in 1962 to serve as parish priest in a number of urban parishes in Shepherds Bush, London, Wood became the Bishop of London’s Race
Relations Officer in 1966. His work to advance the material conditions and legal status of black communities in Britain and abroad gained him an international reputation as a vital force in progressive politics: he played a key role in establishing an independent prosecuting service (the Crown Prosecution Service), was moderator of the World Council of Churches Programme to Combat Racism and led their opposition to apartheid in South Africa, and established a successful employment training scheme for black men and women in South London. Wood was the first black Bishop in the Church of England – the culmination of a career dedicated to tackling racial discrimination but also the purportedly crowning achievement of the Church’s efforts to engage with the black British population. On the day of his consecration as Bishop of Croydon, 25 April 1985, Wood stood alongside Archbishop of Canterbury Robert Runcie and an ITV news reporter on the steps of St Paul’s Cathedral (Fig. 2):

ITV Reporter: Archbishop, is he going to bring any special skills to Croydon do you think?
Runcie: Yes he’s going to bring a wide knowledge of London. He’s going to bring something of his Caribbean cheerfulness and rejoicing into the congregations and life of the people of Croydon.¹

That Runcie chose to speak of Wood’s local knowledge and invoke a black person’s emotionality tells us something important about the persistence of racialized discourses and the culture of whiteness which existed in the Anglican elite. It

Fig. 2. Bishop Wilfred Wood and Archbishop Robert Runcie interviewed by ITV on the day of Wood’s consecration as Bishop of Croydon, 25 April 1985.
is the tension between the Church’s response to ‘race relations’ as a political subject and its lived experience at parochial level that we explore in this article. Leech and Wood were undoubtedly key figures in the Church of England’s anti-racist movement in the late 1970s and 1980s. However, we wish to situate them in a broader story about the Church’s complex and ambiguous relationship with race. As cultural geographer Lily Kong argues, scholars of urban religion tend to focus optimistically on the ‘poetics of community’ but pay less attention to the attendant ‘politics of place’: to the tensions, inequalities and power relations which structure the late-modern city. In order to understand how inner-city clergy engaged in anti-racism at an everyday level, the ‘poetics of community’ and the ‘politics of place’ must be recognized as deeply entangled.

Existing studies of the Church’s response to urban decline in the ‘long 1980s’, from historians like Eliza Filby and Matthew Grimley, have focused on the public pronouncements of clerical elites. Making use of the abundant archival records which document the words and ideas of bishops and archbishops, these histories demonstrate how the ‘inner city’ increasingly became a touchstone for dialogue between Church and state over the moral and material impact of social inequalities and immigration. At the centre of these accounts of the Church’s resistance to Thatcherism is the report of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Commission on Urban Priority Areas Faith in the City (1985). Established in response to widespread anxieties about urban unrest between 1980 and 1981 in the inner-city areas of Brixton in London, Toxteth in Liverpool, Moss Side in Manchester, and St Paul’s in Bristol, the Commission called for the establishment of a ‘Church Urban Fund’ to target inner cities. It also laid the foundations for the Committee for Black Anglican Concerns – an attempt [to] make a clear response not only to racial discrimination and disadvantage, but also to the alienation, hurt and rejection experienced by many black people in relation to the Church of England. Faith in the City was described by an anonymous cabinet minister as ‘pure Marxist theology’, and retrospectively by Filby as ‘one of the most incisive and important critiques of Thatcher’s Britain’. A series of follow-up reports commissioned by the Church in the 1990s and 2000s celebrated Faith in the City as a watershed in the Church’s engagement with social and racial injustice in Britain’s urban spaces. We reconsider the ‘radical’ legacy of top-down initiatives such as Faith in the City, particularly their impact on the everyday politics of race, placing them in the context of what Kennetta Hammond Perry has described as the postwar ‘mystique of British anti-racism’. This mystique has its roots in the mythologization of events like the Battle of Cable Street in 1936, and in Britain’s wider opposition to fascism during the Second World War, creating a sense of national moral exceptionalism. As commentator Tank Green observes, histories of black experiences of the city in postwar Britain have only touched on the role of religion. Two recent studies – Kieran Connell’s discussion of Methodist and Pentecostal Churches in Birmingham, and Camilla Schofield and
Ben Jones’s exploration of a ‘motley group’ of Methodist ministers and Christian workers critiquing a ‘Welfarist, ameliorative approach to antiracism after the 1958 Notting Hill riots’ – are exceptions.16 Historians have also examined the growing religious diversity in urban areas, paying particular attention to emergent interfaith and ecumenical work: John Maiden has traced how the British Council of Churches sponsored the growth of ‘ecumenical multiculturalism’ from the early 1970s, while Emily Harris has uncovered the operation of interfaith networks between Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities.17 Anglicanism remains largely absent in the burgeoning scholarship on the racial dimensions of the urban uprisings in London, Liverpool, Manchester, and Bristol.18 The dominant story of race and Anglicanism in modern Britain is that the Church of England did not do enough to welcome, and in many cases was actively hostile to, the Caribbean migrants who arrived in the postwar decades.19 Building on this literature, we demonstrate that a consciousness of these failings was growing within a section of the Anglican Church by the late 1970s. Historians of religion have recently recovered the overlooked role of the Church in the social justice movements of the 1960s. Matthew Grimley, Peter Webster, and Hannah Elias have all pointed to the Church of England’s interventions in domestic and transnational debates about citizenship, immigration and race, offering valuable correctives to the notion that the swinging sixties witnessed the ‘death of Christian Britain’.20 These studies have complicated assumptions about the aloof and marginal role of the Church in the public realm, but have tended to be couched at macro levels of national or international discourse, rather than the lived experience at a parochial level.

Here we draw on oral history interviews with erstwhile parish clergy and their family members (anonymized for ethical reasons) and on archival sources which document the internal discussions of the Church. We explore the diverse and contradictory attempts of the Anglican Church to intervene in the politics of race.21 While these sources allow us to dig beneath the official anti-racist rhetoric sometimes emanating from the Church, we are nevertheless still dependent on the evidence of white, male, and middle-class voices. We are interested in how these actors narrate the ideas and assumptions which underpin their own shifting conceptions of Anglicanism, anti-racism and urban change.22 We argue that Anglicanism was a vital force in both conjuring and confronting the racialized ‘crisis of the inner city’.23 An understanding of the complex and ambivalent significance of Anglicanism in the processes through which the ‘crisis’ of the inner city was generated and experienced needs to recognize the multiple scales on which ‘the Church’ operated – from the domestic to the local, to the national. We organize our discussion around these different, though overlapping, scales of Anglican action.24

The first section demonstrates that the proliferation of reports, commissions, and writings on urban decline from within the Church contributed to the stigmatized and pathologized imaginary of the ‘inner city’. The self-consciously ‘progressive’ rhetoric emanating from the Church hierarchy was constrained by the paternalism and whiteness epitomized in Runcie’s comments about Bishop Wilfred Wood. While the directives which were produced at national and diocesan levels did little
to combat the Church’s historic investment in racism, we argue in our second section that at a parochial level the embeddedness of Anglican clergy in urban communities enabled an everyday engagement with the material conditions and inequalities of the inner city. This was a peculiarly Anglican form of engagement which was constituted by ideas of witness, paternalism, and evangelism. Anglican clergy were by no means the only denomination or religious group encountering everyday racism on the ground, or even the most radical or consistent in their solidarity with minority ethnic communities. Inner-city spaces were characterized by high levels of religious plurality during this period, with multiple faith groups actively involved in political struggles around race. But the Church of England’s distinctive commitment to having its clergy live within every community in the country in the clerical home afforded distinctive challenges and opportunities for confronting urban racism, deprivation and disadvantage. We conceptualize this unique form of living as ‘parochial domesticity’. Our second section demonstrates how parochial domesticity enabled Anglican clergy to engage with everyday racism in the emblematic inner-city locations of London and Liverpool. Cindi Katz has suggested that ‘resistance’ to oppressive structures at a local level should be understood in relation to the analytical categories of ‘resilience’ and ‘reworking’. While perhaps not consistently a force of ‘resistance’, the activity of parish clergy can be understood as amounting to a politics of reworking – daily efforts to work around, between and beneath the structures of race without explicitly challenging the systems which upheld them. In the final section we provide a close study of the impact of parochial domesticity on clerical anti-racist activities during a set of events in July 1981 that have come to be known as the ‘Toxteth riots’, or the ‘Liverpool 8 uprisings’.

THE CENTRAL CHURCH AND URBAN ANTI-RACISM, 1972–1985

Speaking in General Synod on the 24 January 2020, Rev. Andrew Moughtin-Mumby (St Peter’s Walworth) called for the Church of England to apologize for its ‘horrible and humiliating racism’ towards people of the Windrush generation. He recounted stories of black people refused entry to Anglican churches. Doreen Browne, who arrived in the UK in 1956 aged sixteen, spoke of her mother being turned away on the steps of St Peter’s, Walworth in South London ‘due to the plain fact of the colour of her black skin’. One interviewee explained that this was not an infrequent occurrence for black Anglicans of the time:

Common was a smiling white clergy person welcoming them when they came in, and when they shake their hands on the way out . . . saying ‘please don’t come back next week’. All said with a smile.

Moughtin-Mumby’s comments, which prompted Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby to issue a statement which expressed ‘lament’ and ‘shame’ for the damage done to ‘the Church . . . the image of God . . . most of all those we victimised, unconsciously very often’, did not mark a sudden awakening to the racism which had underpinned the Church’s response to race. A consciousness of the
Church’s failure to welcome black migrants in urban parishes was gradually taking shape within certain sections of the Anglican hierarchy by the early 1970s. It was discussed in the ‘Working Party on Local Ministry in Urban and Industrial Areas’ (1972). This group met under the joint chairmanship of the then Bishop of Woolwich, David Sheppard, and the Bishop of Stepney, Trevor Huddleston, to discuss East and South-East London, differentiating the challenges of the ‘city’ from that of industrial ‘towns’. The group’s Report acknowledged that in the city, ‘Church and population remain alienated from one another’, and made a number of suggestions to diversify the Church of England’s leadership and train clergy to offer a more ‘community-aware’ form of ministry. Issues of race, however, were largely subsumed into the apparently larger crisis of class:

There has been much mention of class. This is obviously resented by many who would like to remove the word from our vocabulary . . . But the division of race will not go away by pretending it is not there. No more will the division of class. We need to recognize it’s a reality.

The Report did point to the significance of the inner-city clergy’s embedded form of living: ‘Clergy know the problem of east and south east London not as an academic question but out of their own local experience’. Race was addressed more directly and thoroughly by the Church through its involvement in ‘The British Council of Churches Working Party on Britain as a Multi-Racial Society’. Established in 1973, this working party of cross-denominational representatives included a more ethnically and ecclesiastically diverse membership than Sheppard and Huddleston’s committee. Its publication, *The New Black Presence in Britain: a Christian Scrutiny* (1976), offered a radical manifesto for rethinking the Christian approach to black people. The foreword warned:

The reader, who is accustomed to reports in the British Churches, will be surprised by the style of this pamphlet. It is not a judicious report on a controversial subject, but an invitation to Whites to engage with angry and alienated Blacks – to see ourselves as others see us.

The Chairman of the Council, black Anglican scholar Augustine John renowned for his seminal anthropological study *Race in the Inner City* (1971) and work as Director of the Youth and Race in the Inner City Project, called for the Church to acknowledge its culpability for the oppression of black people, and play a central role in the ‘reordering of society . . . and deliverance of the oppressed which, as Church, it must have in Christ’. The energized language of black radical thought shone through the pages of the Report:

The black presence can offer new awareness, out of its own rich understanding of man in society: it can bring insights and values that have long been eroded in the West.
In stressing the transformative value of black thought and culture, rather than championing assimilation, the contents of the pamphlet chime with what Rob Waters describes as a historically-specific moment for black radicalism between 1964 and 1985. ‘Thinking Black’, as Waters describes it, found expression in Anglican texts such as *The New Black Presence* which predated, and indeed were more radical than, the ‘progressive’ reports and commissions of the 1980s.

The progressive legacy of *Faith in the City* was enshrined in Anglican thinking by a number of follow-up reports issued by the Church in the 1990s. The titles of these reports constructed a Whiggish story of Anglican progress, with *Seeds of Hope* (1991) moving to a *Passing Winter* (1996). These reports narrated the Church’s putative awakening to the issue of race from the mid 1980s, precipitated by *Faith in the City*, acted upon in the 1990s, and then all but resolved by the ‘passing winter’ of 1996. This optimistic language was echoed in Glynne Gordon-Carter’s 2003 book, *An Amazing Journey: the Church of England’s Response to Institutional Racism*. While the contents of these publications did point to the work which still needed to be done (a black woman who had migrated to the UK from the Caribbean, Gordon-Carter was forthright in her diagnosis of the Church’s past failings), they reinforced a sense that *Faith in the City* had ushered in a bright new era in the Church’s relationship with the politics of race. The optimism of these texts reflected a wider confidence in the capacity of the existing institutions to remedy inequalities and structural racism.

But not everyone in the Church agreed. From its publication, *Faith in the City* drew criticism from the radical leftist wings of Anglicanism. In his seminal work *Trouble in Modern Babylon* (1988) Leech explained that ‘the report is weak in its treatment of racism . . . it raises problems and then runs away from them’, offering ‘no advice on how not to perpetuate the middle-class image and hierarchy’. At the heart of Leech’s frustrations with *Faith in the City* was its inability to treat racism as a structural issue, its unwillingness to condemn the culpability of the police or magistrates, and its refusal to name and interrogate capitalism. Leech’s views on the weakness of *Faith in the City* were widely held within the network of radical clergy who were often based in inner-city parishes. ‘Rev. David’, a parish priest in Liverpool, described the impact of *Faith in the City* as ‘pathetic ... the only thing that really came out of it was a typical patronising Church Urban Fund. So you patted the poor on their head and gave them a little bit of money’. A parish priest who served in the inner cities of both Liverpool and London during the 1980s and 1990s recalled his reaction:

I was very critical of it. I thought the theology was very cheap, and I thought they were largely producing sticking plaster answers. I was ordained in about the week it came out and David Sheppard came to our parish to speak on the television about it, and stood in front of an empty house on Tower Hill ... Kirkby, being the most bandit country of Liverpool. And kids saw that there was a television film camera there and took the house apart behind him as he was speaking. The windows came out and the frames were taken out, and it
was a really interesting description, right there in front of the Bishop, of the real problems.\textsuperscript{44}

The image of a derelict house being dismantled behind a bishop as he announced the Church’s ‘ground-breaking’ intervention in the politics of urban decline captured the disjuncture between the rhetoric of \textit{Faith in the City} and the realities of inner-city life.

The ‘sticking plaster’ analogy accurately characterized a deeper reticence within the Church to enact an effective and lasting interrogation of its relations to race. \textit{Faith in the City} suggested the immediate establishment of a ‘Commission’ for Black Anglican Concerns. But this suggestion was voted down by the General Synod in February 1986. Speaking in the Synod, Canon Ivor Smith-Cameron lamented that:

\begin{quote}
This decision of an all-white Standing Committee not to recommend a Commission for Black Anglican Concerns had sent a wave of bewilderment, distress, frustration and horror throughout black constituencies, both in the Church and in society outside the Church.\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}

Instead, a ‘Committee’, with the status of a sub-committee, was approved and was chaired by Wilfred Wood. Rev. Clarence Hendrickse explained that the preference for a ‘Committee’ as opposed to a ‘Commission’ stemmed from

\begin{quote}
\[an\] underlying feeling within the Standing Committee that groups of black people meeting together might become subversive \ldots [with] the power to officially criticise the values, attitudes and modus operandi of Boards and Committees in their negative effect on Church members.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

The term ‘Commission’ seemed to imply guilt, a guilt that, in spite of the spirit of self-reflection that \textit{Faith in the City} claimed to embody, significant factions of the Church were not ready to confront. Azariah France-Williams has described this moment as a ‘fork in the road’ in the Church’s engagement with race: ‘that was what took us down to where we are now’.\textsuperscript{47} From this perspective, the second half of the 1980s marked a false dawn, a set of missed opportunities, rather than a watershed moment in the history of the Church’s engagement with race.

The almost-always white, often Oxbridge-educated, largely male Christian socialists who were critical of these central institutions also played their part in derailing the Church’s efforts to engage effectively with black migrant communities. Between 28 February and 2 March 1986, the ‘Race, Pluralism and Community Group of the Board of Social Responsibility of the Church of England’ gathered for a ‘Consultation on the Church of England and Racism’ at the Balsall Heath Church Centre, Birmingham, with a view to establishing a new permanent committee for racial justice. The resulting pamphlet, \textit{Racism and Anglicanism}, gathered the papers presented by the main speakers, including Leech, reporting in his capacity as Race Relations Field Officer for the Board.
of Social Justice. Among the other presenters was Barney Pityana, Vicar of Immanuel, Highers Heath, Birmingham, and a founder of the Black Consciousness Movement of Azania. His paper was entitled *A Black Anglican Perspective*, which reflected the fact that he was the only black speaker invited. Pityana expressed concern that one man only, Leech, was expected to do the job of Race Relations Field Officer, with ‘limited resources and a skeleton staff’. The precarious and tokenistic nature of the role ‘for a task of such magnitude’ reflected the Church’s ad hoc and individualized approach to anti-racist work. Pityana went on to question the impact and working methods of Leech himself:

I am not aware what influence he has been able to bring to bear on the structures and decision-making processes of the Church. I also have the impression that he is undertaking his brief without any coherent strategy. The paper [Leech’s report] does not immediately show what long-term and short-term goals he has decided for himself and what method of assessment of audit he has developed . . . if he is to take us on board we need to help one another strategise more coherently.  

This characterization of Leech as a lone actor, working without care or concern for others striving towards the same goals, was corroborated by a number of the interviewees who had lived and worked with him:

He was never of the people. Similar background to mine, and yet he never spoke to the people. He was incredibly self-absorbed. He struggled to relate to people on a one-to-one basis.

With an approach that relied heavily on individual efforts, and without a co-ordinated strategy led from the top, the Church’s anti-racist endeavours were always likely to be dependent on the personal traits and inclinations of those involved. Leech increasingly found himself an outrider within the Church, not receiving the support or resources he required. The Church’s inability to generate a radical programme on the politics of race should not be viewed as a straightforward consequence of ‘moderates’ compromising the integrity of the mission, nor of anonymous bureaucrats stifling action. It also represented a reflection of the deeper disconnect between the Anglican hierarchy’s framing of race as an intellectual subject and everyday experience in the inner city.

**Parochial Domesticity and the Everyday Politics of Anti-Racism**

The significance of Column 88’s death threat to Leech lay in its form as well as its content. It was a letter delivered by post to his home. Crucially, its communication was facilitated by the publicly accessible status of clergy housing. The distinctive nature of vicarages, as both private homes and public, outward-facing spaces of urban ministry, meant that Leech and other clergy were always visible in inner-city communities. Leech and his wife Rheta’s vicarage, in one of the UK’s most
socio-economically deprived inner-city areas, was constantly on show: his doorbell, letterbox, and phone number all provided gateways to the neighbourhood. His life, and that of his family, were open to the community. This embeddedness represented a significant element in the Church’s engagement with race.

Writing in the *Evening Standard* to mark forty years of Kenneth Leech’s ministry in the East End, the journalist Simon Jenkins observed that:

The doctors, teachers, social workers and police who work here commute from more salubrious parts. But the priests stay. They stay even when their flock is 70% Muslim. They seem wedded to sheer geography.53

The boundaries between the public and private, home and work, the sacred and the secular became increasingly blurred in the modern clerical home. As the BBC comedy-drama series *Rev.* epitomized, the front door of the vicarage was always on display, a threshold to the tensions, challenges and opportunities of the surrounding city. We conceptualize this unique form of living as ‘parochial domesticity’ and argue that the embedded spatiality of the inner-city clerical home afforded distinctive challenges and opportunities for engaging in anti-racist work and reworking the conditions of the inner city.

The period between 1970 and the mid 1990s marked an apogee for ‘parochial domesticity’. Responding to urban decline and ‘race relations’, fuelled by the democratizing impetuses of ‘liberal theology’, the Church of England became committed to a form of city ministry which responded to social issues ‘from the vicarage front door’.54 Forged against the traditional image of the vicarage as a quaint, bucolic symbol of clerical exceptionalism, or what seventeenth-century writer George Herbert described as a ‘happy hiding-place’, the new framing of the vicarage, introduced by the Church Commissioners’ manual colloquially known as the ‘Green Guide’ (first edition, 1975), imagined a porous space, a place of ‘home’ as much for the wider parish as for its residents.55 This commitment to the openness of the vicarage came to an abrupt halt in the summer of 1996 when Rev. Christopher Grey was stabbed on his vicarage front doorstep in Liverpool. The assailant had been regularly calling at the vicarage for money and support. A series of reforms aimed at securing the safety of the vicar and his family ensued. It was found necessary to formalize the boundaries between the public and private functions of the clerical home. Following a programme of field research where Commissioners visited inner-city parishes across the country, the final iteration of the ‘Green Guide’ was published in 1998 and included stringent security measures ‘specific to the inner city’, with special guidelines for the ‘worst areas’.56 At the same time, the porosity of vicarages was being rendered problematic by growing concerns about safeguarding.57

We focus on how clergy intervened in the everyday politics of race at a parochial level in two ‘inner-city’ locations: London and Liverpool. Both cities witnessed significant socio-economic change as a result of de-industrialization in this period and saw their respective docklands broken up as centres of work and community.58 But both also represented specific forms of the inner city. London
had been shaped by large-scale migration, while Liverpool was characterized by sectarian divisions. Even so, popular imaginings of the inner city in both locations share two characteristics. First, as Simon Peplow and Gareth Millington have argued, they were both racialized. They were both sites of violence in 1981, with events which were framed by the media as ‘race riots’. While Paul Gilroy urges us not to exaggerate the uniformity of these disturbances, Peplow has pointed to underlying commonalities in their causes: economic deprivation, a sense of political disenfranchisement, hostility towards the police and deep-rooted racial disadvantage. Second, the inner cities of London and Liverpool were both constructed as essentially secular spaces, with the Church positioned as either neutral observer or as reactive responder to the challenges of urban change. By refocusing attention away from ‘the empty Church’ to the bustling vicarage, we can reimagine Anglicanism as a force in the racialized territorialization of the inner city.

The vicarage itself was a site of contestation. This is exemplified by an incident documented in two letters found in Kenneth Leech’s personal papers. The first is a handwritten letter of complaint sent by a Mrs Osbourne to the Bishop of Stepney (effectively Leech’s boss), who at that time was the high-profile anti-apartheid campaigner Trevor Huddleston. The letter was signed by twenty children and related to an incident which occurred over the weekend of the Queen’s Silver Jubilee in July 1977:

I am writing to you with an official complaint about Mrs Leech, wife of the vicar of St Matthew’s Church. On Wednesday night she came out and tore down the decorations (which were for our street party) which were attached to the Rectory walls. The decorations had been put up by the children of the estate and they were very upset at seeing a member of the Church taking this action as most of the children were confirmed at St Matthew’s. When approached, she stated she would have taken them down sooner, but she was on holiday. This has ruined our Jubilee week.

Here Mrs Osbourne claims a right to the rectory, or its walls, at least. Huddleston wrote back, tactfully defending Rheta Leech’s actions and pointing to the wider issues at stake:

the disagreement arose over the Union Jacks which were used to decorate the Rectory (walls) and which were put there without the permission or any attempt to get the consent of the Rector or Mrs Leech. Moreover, I am assured that Mrs Leech unable to reach some of the flags asked for their removal in no spirit of anger, but simply explaining that it was not right to decorate someone else’s home without their consent.

For the Leeches the issue was not simply one of consent, but rather the form of the decoration – the Union Flag. Given the appropriation of the Union Jack by the National Front, such decoration clearly took on more troubling meanings. Not
everyone shares the same viewpoint about displaying Union Jacks, explained Huddleston in his reply, counselling Mrs Osbourne that different opinions 'should be respected'. Vicarages were significant in the political struggles that lay at the heart of British inner cities in the 1970s and 1980s, spaces in which competing notions of national identity, urban belonging and Anglicanism played out at an everyday level.

The embedded location of the vicarage meant that the whole clergy family were on the frontline. An interviewee we are calling Ruth was thirteen at the time of the disturbances in the L8 district of Liverpool, and recalled her father, the parish priest of the local Anglican Church, setting out into the night:

My Dad was very proactive. He was out on the streets some of the nights when there was looting and rioting and stuff. And I certainly remember being really scared for him.

Ruth’s concern for her father was heightened by her own proximity to the danger:

... you could see, physically you could see the burning places from the house. It was a very tall thin house, the sky light was very high up, and you could see it, so it wasn’t just a theoretical ‘they’re out there’. They’re out there and it was scary. You’d see it on the news the next day. We were very connected and it was very, very real for us really.

The commitment to parochial domesticity was driven by the clergyman’s vocation but implicated the whole household. Another letter (dated 1993) in Kenneth Leech’s archive and addressed to the Bishop of Stepney, Jim Thompson, reveals the fallout from the presence of the National Front in the late 1970s:

The first thing that I should tell you is that my marriage has finally ended. Without going into too much detail, Rheta, my wife, had some very major upheavals in 1979, partly connected with the National Front activity in Bethnal Green, though there were other factors.

A number of the interviewees we spoke to went through periods of separation, in some cases divorce, as a consequence of the strains of urban ministry. Parochial domesticity took a toll on everyone involved.

The location of the vicarage enabled clergy to respond quickly and directly to unfolding events. An interviewee whom we are calling the Rev. Matthew was a white parish priest from the mid 1970s to the end of the 1990s in Southall, which was home to a large Punjabi Sikh population. He came to public attention after being quoted on the BBC, publicly denouncing Thatcher’s approach to race relations after the so-called Brixton riots in 1981. Rev. Matthew had been present during disturbances in 1979 over the National Front’s decision to stage a meeting in Southall Town Hall – the events which became known for the death of Blair...
Peach, a white member of the Anti-Nazi League, who died after being struck by a police baton. Rev. Matthew went out into the streets on the night the unrest occurred, explaining afterwards that he needed to ‘observe’, to be a ‘witness’. He later described the National Front’s meeting in Southall Town Hall as ‘bogus’, strategically planned for the sole purpose of provoking unrest. Notwithstanding his anti-racist convictions, we were interested to hear what motivated him to risk his own life:

A concern for people. Part of the Gospel is that all are one in Christ: basic tenets of the Gospel. A Jew and gentile division may be replayed by white and black division. And a concern for church members, but also church growth. If you are going to reach out to people, you’ve got to [laughs], you’ve got to be looking outwards.72

There is an interesting evangelical flavour to Rev. Matthew’s motivations. His pastoral model of ministry was equally concerned with conversion and the acquisition of believers. As he was trained at an Evangelical theological college this might come as little surprise. Yet he also identified as left-wing (a rarity within evangelical factions). This is an aspect of Anglican inner-city ministry – the opportunity to expand the Church in an acquisitive manner – which is rarely articulated so candidly.

Rev. Matthew’s testimony prompts us to reflect on questions about the motivations of the clergy’s involvement in the inner city and the extent to which deprived urban areas were viewed as fertile grounds for the Church to develop its congregations. How far was the anti-racism of inner-city priests a historically specific response to the ‘crisis of the inner city’ in the 1980s, or a continuation of a longer tradition in the Church, rooted in nineteenth-century fears of the ‘godless city’? To explore the role of parochial domesticity in ‘reworking’ the structures of racial disadvantage within inner-city communities, we move in our final section to focus on the July 1981 events commonly referred to as the ‘Toxteth riots’, or ‘Liverpool 8 uprisings’.

PAROCHIAL DOMESTICITY AMIDST THE ‘TOXTETH RIOTS’

Unrest and violence erupted on the streets of Liverpool 8 when a young black man, Leroy Alphonse Cooper, was questioned by the police about the suspected theft of a motorcycle. The accusation proved erroneous, but it was the excessive police response – eight police vehicles arrived at the scene – which particularly incensed locals. Over the next eight days and nights, at least seventy buildings were badly damaged, 500 people arrested, 468 officers injured, and one man died.73 None of these buildings were churches or religious places of worship. One local resident, whom we are calling Michael, explained that on Princes Avenue, just off Parliament Street in the heart of Liverpool 8, many of the commercial buildings and places of business were targeted by arson attacks, but St Margaret’s of Antioch Church was untouched:
I can remember seeing on one side of the Church this hardware store had been entirely burnt down, and on the other side a cinema had been set alight, but the Church and vicarage in the middle were entirely untouched. It is thought that the church was seen to be different from the other capitalistic businesses; on the side of the rioters. 74

The parish priest at the time, Rev. David, corroborated this story, recalling that the ‘black activists leading the protests’ did not simply grant the vicarage deliverance. They actively protected it:

The vicarage was protected by local lads... I knew lots of people had come in from all over on the second night... Peter Bassey, one of the local, marvellous blokes – he and a few others were at the vicarage gates. And if any strangers came along and wanted to attack the vicarage they said [adopts a Scouse accent] ‘hey fuck off, he’s one of us!’75

That St Margaret’s and other religious buildings were alone in being shielded from the protestors’ fury offers us an indication of the distinctive significance of religion in the inner city – the spiritual and emotional status which faith-buildings retained amidst widespread anger directed towards other established authorities. It was also a testament to the popularity of Rev. David with the local black community. Rev. David practised a form of inner-city ministry which was driven by a commitment to the people of his parish above and beyond the people of his congregation. His rambling, Victorian vicarage was an ‘open house’ for the community: the four spare bedrooms accommodated countless homeless people, the basement served as a youth club, the kitchen hosted weekly Sunday lunches for anyone who wanted to join, the toilet – known locally as the ‘Shrine to Our Lady of Finchley’ – was bedecked with satirical posters and postcards lampooning Margaret Thatcher, and the ample living-room served as a space for numerous community action groups by day, as well as alcohol and cannabis infused parties for late night revellers. The activists who had protected the vicarage on the second night of the riots later told Rev. David’s successor at St Margaret’s, Rev. Trevor, that they had warned the non-local rioters in no uncertain terms: ‘Leave this alone, Leave this alone: this is ours’ (Fig. 3). 76

Rev. David’s close engagement with the community was publicly applauded by Diocesan leaders, but tacitly viewed as coming at the expense of his duties to Church growth. According to a contemporary member of the Diocesan team, ‘Rev. David went native – he didn’t bother in terms of Church, didn’t bother to grow the Church. 77 With its racialized connotations, ‘going native’ is revealing. St Margaret’s relatively small congregation of white working-class families was situated at the heart of the surrounding Toxteth area, which was synonymous with the black community. Negotiating the tension between ‘growing the Church’, an imperative driven by the dwindling congregations, and serving the wider parish was a major preoccupation for inner-city clergy. For Rev. David and his successors at
St. Margaret’s, the question of whether to prioritize the congregation or the community was inflected by the racial territorialization of the neighbourhood. The respect shown for church buildings during the riots was reciprocated by clergy who made them refuges for those affected by the violence. As Liverpool-based vicar Rev. John Davies writes in his memoir:

The church people of Liverpool 8 opened the doors of their places of worship during the period of the riots, to anyone who wanted to come in, for sanctuary, for prayer, for healing, for reconciliation, even for the amnesty of stolen goods. The Police and the policed, and other local people all responded well to this.78

The vicarage also had an active role in processes of reconciliation. A local resident recalls that the vicarage at St Margaret’s of Antioch, attached to the Church but with its front door opening onto the street, ‘actually hosted mediation meetings between the police and rioters. After four nights of violence, things didn’t seem to be letting up... [The parish priest] proposed meeting there as it was seen as neutral territory by both sides’. 79

Following initial impromptu meetings, a series of ‘Community Police Forums’ were hosted by churches around Liverpool. Held in Anglican church halls and

Fig. 3: The vicarage of St Margaret’s of Antioch, Toxteth. Photograph by David Geiringer, January 2019.
vicarages but incorporating various denominational leaders, they attempted to bridge the divide between the police and the black community.

These Forums established a model for future attempts by the Church to take a lead in engaging with local black communities: face-to-face meetings intended to air grievances in avowedly ‘neutral’ spaces. The Toxteth Activities Group was one such enterprise. It evolved into what William E. Nelson describes as one of the ‘premier non-profit agencies in Liverpool’, which offered the local community job search and welfare-rights counselling, business advisory services, employment training, and (later) computer training. But it began life as a clerical attempt to smooth fractured race relations immediately after the disturbances, initially through camping trips. The group was pioneered by someone we will refer to as the Rev. Mark:

One of our clergy had particularly good relations with black people and we decided we set up a thing called the Toxteth Activities Group. Now I had already established links with, one of the Wimpey Trusts. I said I need 1000 quid to buy some camping equipment. That money came the next day funnily enough, so we were able to set up with that money, a programme where two or three coppers would go away with 10 or 12 young black people, knock the hell out of one another verbally and physically to build relationships. And I think that was quite important at the time. Small fry, but important.81

Mobilizing local knowledge and social networks, and drawing on the trust which the grassroots parish clergy had established through their inner-city location, the Toxteth Activities Group had the most enduring legacy of the clergy-led responses to the riots. It is remembered by the clergy involved as a successful endeavour, but the memories of the black participants remain unrecorded.82 The ‘activities’ on the arranged camping trips were certainly imbued with assumptions about black masculinity – sport, machismo and conflict resolution were the order of the day – and the need to escape the degradation of the inner city for the purifying tonic of the countryside. While the format fell more neatly within the traditional repertoire of paternalistic Anglican approaches to social problems than its architects envisioned, the Toxteth Activity Group’s emphasis on activity represented an early effort to enact a practical reworking rather than abstract response to racial disenchantment.

The Toxteth Activities Group provided clergy with the opportunity for mutually exchanging ideas and experiences with the communities they were serving. Rev. Mark explained that:

I became very acutely aware of the issues that black people were facing. It was a major learning curve for me, I had to learn a new language, a new set of values, a new kind of engagement with black people.83

How should we read this self-conscious articulation of white, middle-class clergy ‘learning’ from black people? Rev. Mark went on: ‘I don’t think I ever mastered a
competence in dealing with black people, but my attitude to black people had changed considerably.84

The language (‘mastering a competence in dealing with black people’) reveals the underlying assumptions of even the progressive clergy – the idea that ministering to black people was a professional skill to be acquired. At a parochial level, clergy were changing their own approaches to diversity in their attempts to rework the ‘crisis of the inner city’. But as they did so they still reproduced inherited sentiments of white paternalism.

CONCLUSION

Our article makes three key contributions to the entangled histories of religion, race, and urban change. First, we challenge the idea that the mid 1980s was a pivotal moment in the Church of England’s anti-racism. Anglican voices, notably black theologians and clergy, were agitating for, and developing, anti-racist change in British society from well before the urban unrest of the early 1980s. Equally, headline-grabbing initiatives such as Faith in the City did not precipitate a sea change in the Church’s approach to ‘race relations’, or a new era of Anglican radicalism. The underlying contradictions and continuities of the period which we describe as the ‘long 1980s’ reached back into the longue durée of the postwar decades. In this sense, the periodization advanced here contributes to recent histories that decentre ‘Thatcherism’, and its epochal significance, from the 1980s, and to those which reassess the popular memory of the 1970s as an era of ‘crisis’ sandwiched between periods of social democracy and multicultural neoliberalism.85 By illuminating the gaps between anti-racist prescription and practice in the Church throughout the period from the 1970s to the 1990s, we locate Anglicanism within longer trajectories of social and cultural continuity.

Second, we suggest that when exploring race in this period historians should reorient their attention from the central Church to the parish and the everyday. We have made a case for the significance of parochial domesticity to an understanding of the clerical attempts to rework the unequal and racist conditions of the inner city.86 But how did black, inner-city residents feel about their vicars? How did they evaluate the impact of clerical anti-racist endeavours on their lives? While Rev. David insisted that ‘people knew the Church was on their side’, another white vicar candidly offered a different perspective:

Interviewer: What did you do to counter racism in a practical, everyday sense?
Rev. Simon: [Pauses] I didn’t do very much, other than being myself. I listened to people.87

One black priest recalled his own experiences of parochial life as a youth worker, prior to ordination:

The vicar would invite his favourites back to the vicarage after a Sunday service, because I worked in the Church ... I managed to get back, but it was all white folks and the church was a multi-cultural church. So actually,
the vicarage in that instance was an exclusive club. It was like, if you got there, you knew you were one of the vicar’s favourites.88

Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic inner-city residents are notably silent in our story; recovering the voices of these actors is a vital imperative for future research on religion in the inner city during these years.

Third, we extend work in urban studies which applies a ‘post-secular’ lens to understandings of the city.89 An attention to the embeddedness of clergy living encourages scholars to look beyond the dichotomy of ‘Church’ and ‘people’ which has characterized narratives of secularization, and to resituate religion in everyday urban experience. Our emphasis on parochial domesticity in the inner city chimes with David Goodhew’s research on the revival of religious belief following the arrival of new migrant populations from the 1970s.90 Even so, the inner-city ministry of parish clergy should not be interpreted as amounting to an uncontentious, progressive solidarity with black Britons. Nor were Anglican clergy universally inspired by the 1960s ‘liberal theologies’ of John Robinson and others, which Sam Brewitt-Taylor describes as forging a newly cosmopolitan, globalized modernity.91 ‘Faith’ may not have operated ‘in the City’ in the way that Faith in the City invoked. It was nevertheless deeply enmeshed in how the ‘crisis of the inner city’ was imagined and experienced through the impress of race.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2 Correspondence with Commander Neville. Another letter sent to Leech threatening violence is reproduced in Fig. 1.


5 As previous note.


8 ‘WOOD, Wilfred, Bishop of Croydon’: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86ESxEH3T54, accessed 22 March 2021. Thanks to Azariah France-Williams for bringing this clip to our attention.


11 *Faith in the City: a Call for Action by Church and Nation*, Report of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Commission on Urban Priority Areas, 1985. For commentary on the significance of *Faith in the City* in shaping the national discourse on Britain’s inner cities, see Sarah Thieme, “‘To Stay, Serve and Witness’ – Church Politics and British Inner Cities in the 1980s”, Urban History (early view), 2022, pp. 1–18.

12 *Faith in the City*, p. 1.

13 Filby, *God and Mrs Thatcher*, p. 12.


21 In line with Oral History Society ethical guidelines, we have anonymized all interview participants, but figures who are documented in publicly accessible archives, such as Kenneth Leech, are named.

22 Our methodology explored the processes through which the participants, in this case a group endowed with a very particular social status, compose their life narratives and through this a sense of both self and other. See Penny Summerfield, ‘Culture and Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews’, Cultural and Social History 1: 1, 2004, pp. 65–93. Participants were recruited through advertisement in the Church Times and collaboration with the Church of England Research and Statistics Team and the Dioceses of London, Southwark and Liverpool. Interviews followed a life-history approach, with a focus on the participants’ memories of everyday vicarage and parish life, urban ministry and the politics of race, class and gender.

23 We define the ‘inner city’ not simply as a fixed geographical space, but as a site of what James Rhodes and Laurence Brown describe as a set of “material and symbolic processes through which the postwar ‘inner city’ has been the subject and object of socio-political knowledge and action”: James Rhodes and Laurence Brown, ‘The Rise and Fall of the “Inner City”: Race, Space and Urban Policy in Postwar England’, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 45: 17, 2019, pp. 3,243–59, p. 3,243.

24 As both Wood and Leech epitomized, clergy occupied multiple levels within the Church throughout their careers – both started as parish priests who openly critiqued the central hierarchy and ascended to positions of authority within the structures of the central Church. However, their engagement with racism and inequality worked in different ways at a national and parochial level. For a further discussion of this in relation to Wood, see Azariah France-Williams, Ghostship: the Church of England and Institutional Racism, London, 2020.


28 Interview with ‘Rev. Jack’, March 2020. To preserve anonymity we cannot publish date and place of interview.


31 Sheppard and Huddleston were both significant radical figures. Sheppard first came to prominence as a cricketer, but when Bishop of Liverpool (1975–97) he emerged as the Church’s most noticed and critical voice on matters of inner-city poverty, unemployment and racism. Huddleston became Bishop of Stepney in 1968, some years after returning from South Africa, where he had been a high-profile anti-apartheid campaigner. This experience shaped his own commitment to urban ministry, where he combined living on Commercial Road among deprived East End communities with maintaining a public role as a prominent anti-racist, regularly debating with figures like Enoch Powell in the press and other media. Sheppard and Huddleston shared not only a commitment to developing inner-city ministry but also opposition to apartheid; whilst a cricketer, Sheppard had been influential in campaigns to sever British sporting links with South Africa. See Andrew Bradstock, David Sheppard: Batting for the Poor, London, 2019; Robert Denniston, Trevor Huddleston: a Life, Basingstoke, 1999.
39 Waters, *Thinking Black*.
41 For a discussion of emerging work on the 1990s, particularly contested narratives of neoliberalism, see the blogs documenting a workshop series on ‘Rethinking Britain in the 1990s’, convened by Helen McCarthy and David Geiringer, spring 2021: https://pastandpresent.org.uk/when-was-the-nineties/, accessed 22 March 2021.
51 Interview with ‘Rev. Christopher’, online, 22 July 2020.
52 Leech’s papers at the Bishopsgate Institute include an extensive collection of letters, including dialogues with conservative public figures like philosopher Roger Scruton and politician Enoch Powell, but also unsolicited attacks from members of the public.
56 The chief author of the 1998 edition, Alan Guthrie-Jones, now admits that it ‘over-emphasised the peril of the inner city’ and contributed to the stigmatization of this space. Interview with Alan Guthrie Jones, online, 10 January 2019.
57 While we have not focused on this important dimension of clerical homes, we recognize the need to engage with recent scholarship on these themes by Lucy Delap and others. Lucy Delap, ‘“Disgusting Details which are Best Forgotten”: Disclosures of Child Sexual Abuse in Twentieth-Century Britain’, *Journal of British Studies* 57: 1, 2018, pp. 79–107.
61 Hirsch and Swanson, ‘Photojournalism and the Moss Side Riots’.
64 Letter from Mrs Osbourne to Bishop of London, 9th June 1977, Kenneth Leech Papers, Bishopsgate Institute Archives, File: ‘Correspondences’.
65 Letter from Bishop of London to Mrs Osbourne, n.d.
66 Letter from Bishop of London to Mrs Osbourne, n.d.
67 Interview with ‘Ruth’, online, 13 March 2020.
68 Interview with ‘Ruth’, as previous note.
70 Kenneth Leech to Jim Thompson, Bishop of Stepney, 3 April 1993, Kenneth Leech Papers, Bishopsgate Institute Archives, File: ‘Correspondences’.
71 For a fuller discussion of the gendered and familial dynamics of life in the clerical home, see Page, ‘Double Scrutiny at the Vicarage’.
73 Peplow, Race and Riots, p. 88.
74 Interview with ‘Michael’, Liverpool, 15 February 2019.
75 Interview with ‘Rev. David’, Liverpool, 29 March 2021.
76 Interview with ‘Rev. Trevor’, online, 26 March 2021.
77 Interview with ‘Rev. Charles’, online, 30 April 2020.
82 Interview with ‘Rev. Mark’.
83 Interview with ‘Rev. Mark’.
84 Interview with ‘Rev. Mark’.
88 Interview with ‘Rev. Jack’, as n. 28.
90 David Goodhew, Church Growth in Britain 1980 to the Present, Abingdon, 2012.