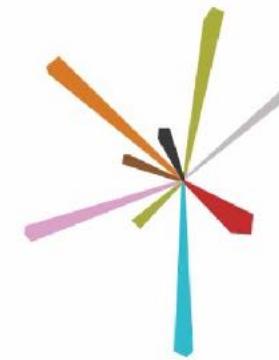




**Urban
Expression**
creative mission on the margins

2022





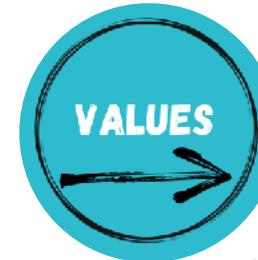
We celebrated our 25th anniversary at a Community Festival in June 2022, in which 84 people came together for a weekend event. This was an opportunity to look back, reflect, give thanks and look ahead.





This impact report charts the achievements of Urban Expression over the past 25 years, considers the struggles and challenges we have faced, provides a marker at this significant juncture, and acknowledges our desire to be accountable to those who have supported Urban Expression in various ways over the years.

Urban Expression is a values-based organisation and community. We have not set goals or attempted to measure everything we are involved in. We operate organically and relationally, responsively rather than strategically, following the energy rather than setting goals. We have resisted requirements from some funders to provide the kinds of information they increasingly demand and have chosen not to pursue some funding possibilities. So, although this report will contain some figures, it consists mainly in narrative and reflections from various people involved in Urban Expression



Early on we identified three core values – relationship, creativity and humility – that have been foundational. We reflect on their implications in our conversations, in our gatherings, in trustees' meetings and in our daily liturgy. They inspire us, shape our practices, preclude certain options and hold us together. These values are deeply owned and fully operative within Urban Expression. They are the reason why many have joined us.

'Praying Our Values' has been widely used also by others with whom these values resonate, and *Urban to the Core*, edited by Juliet Kilpin and published to mark our 15th anniversary, contains stories and reflections that illustrate the impact of our core values. We believe a values-based organisation is a healthy alternative to purpose-driven or goals-oriented approaches.

Urban Expression does not have a statement of faith. We seek to live under the lordship of Jesus Christ, to be responsive to the Holy Spirit's guidance, and to trust each other's integrity. Our commitment is to respect each other's views, embrace the discomfort these may sometimes create, and be open to fresh insights. As and when theological, ethical or other issues arise, we look for guidance – about the issues themselves and about how to engage in conversation around these issues – in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, the rest of Scripture, the experience of Christians elsewhere and our values and commitments.

PEOPLE

Although we have used different terms for those who have joined Urban Expression – team members, mission partners, associates – our mission has been to encourage followers of Jesus to live, work and bear witness in marginalised neighbourhoods and to support them there. Initially, this involved recruiting people and helping them to identify locations; more recently, it has often involved coming alongside those who are already in these contexts.

A distinctive feature of Urban Expression is that we provide no funding for mission partners, who need to support themselves through finding employment or in other ways. Although this is demanding, it is much more sustainable than approaches that require the ongoing funding of project workers in a context of diminishing financial resources.

171 people have officially joined Urban Expression, committing to at least 3 years but in most cases remaining with us for at least a decade. Our attrition rate has been remarkably low with almost nobody leaving within 3 years. Many have continued to live in their neighbourhoods after leaving Urban Expression. In many cases, mission partners have formed local teams of people who do not officially join us but are fully involved, so the number actively



participating is very much higher than the headline figure.

PLACES

Our initial focus was on marginalised inner-city neighbourhoods. Our first seven teams were all in east or south-east London. We prioritised communities in the bottom 5% when measured by the index of multiple deprivation. Over the years, demographic changes, including the gentrification of some urban neighbourhoods, have prompted us to expand to outer housing estates, neglected coastal towns and other marginal places, including some rural communities. We remain committed to mission on the margins, especially in contexts where people experience poverty and deprivation. We have supported mission partners in 46 different locations since 1997 in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

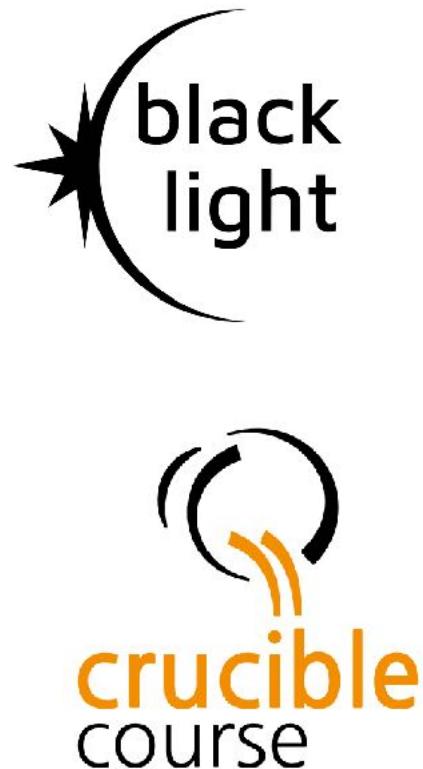




Our mission statement commits us to ‘pioneering creative and relevant expression of the Christian church.’ Our values have shaped what we have pioneered and have encouraged our mission partners to be both creative and contextual.

18 congregations or missional communities have been planted and others are still emerging. We have no numbers of those participating in these churches. All of them are small if only regular participants are counted, but most are connected relationally to large numbers in their communities. And most of those involved are new to faith. Not all of these congregations have persisted.

But our mission partners have pioneered many other initiatives. Research in 2018 revealed an extraordinary range of activities engaging with diverse challenges – environmental care; community organising; working with children and families; developing youth and community centres; engaging with issues of mental health, food poverty, loneliness, domestic abuse, unemployment and racial justice; interfaith relations; social enterprises; political activism; forming community choirs; cross-community sports programmes; and much else.



Over the years, Urban Expression has nurtured other emerging initiatives, providing a temporary governance framework or other forms of support. These include Urban Expression Netherlands, the Incarnate Network, the Pioneer Collective, Peaceful Borders and Coastal Expression.



Urban Expression is the lead organisation in the Crucible course, which started in 2004 and ran for 13 years in Birmingham and then in London, Exeter, Manchester and Southampton before going online in 2020. Roughly 900 people have studied on the course, ranging in age from 18 to over 80 and from many denominational backgrounds (including Baptist, Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Quaker, Church of God of Prophecy, Salvation Army, United Reformed Church, Church of Scotland, Seventh-Day Adventist, Vineyard, New Frontiers, Congregational, Assemblies of God, Elim, and non-denominational). We are now offering hybrid courses.

In 2021, Urban Expression partnered with the Ascension Trust to run the Black Light course online. This ran twice in 2021 and twice again in 2022. Over 200 people have participated in these courses, which will run again in 2023.



Urban Expression is governed by a board of trustees, but strategic initiatives and the pastoral support of our mission partners are the responsibility of the coordinators. Nobody has ever worked for Urban Expression in a full-time capacity; most of the coordinators work one day a week and are funded by grants, as are our operational running costs. The coordinators operate as a team with specific responsibilities – regional or operational – and have avoided any hierarchical titles or arrangements.

Urban Expression is a low-cost organisation, which has enabled us to survive for the past 25 years. We have adjusted our staffing and activities according to the available resources. We are thankful to have received some financial support from individuals, but most has come from charitable trusts. The Jerusalem Trust has been our most consistent and generous supporter and we value their ongoing partnership.



Urban Expression is non-denominational but has strong links with the Baptist Union. We have been recognised as a ‘commanding body’ and a ‘calling body’ for



Baptist ministers. But mission partners come from various denominational backgrounds and are shaped by various traditions – Anabaptist, Evangelical, Celtic, Pentecostal and others. Our coordinators and mission partners have interacted with denominational leaders and many theological colleges and have taught at conferences in the UK and overseas. We have forged partnerships of various kinds over the years with other agencies, including BMS World Mission, Rural Ministries, the Anabaptist Mennonite Network, CURBS, Urban Life and the Ascension Trust. Our mission partners often work in partnership with other local agencies and churches.



Looking back over 25 years gives us an opportunity to reflect on what we want to celebrate and identify ongoing challenges. This is a brief summary of some of the salient issues.

We celebrate and thank God for:

- The numbers of self-funding mission partners committing themselves to many years in marginal communities, their resilience, passion and creativity – and several new conversations with potential mission partners.
- The thousands of people in those neighbourhoods who have been impacted by their lives and witness as they have ‘kept the rumour of God alive’ in these places.
- Those who have come to faith in Jesus Christ, have been baptised and have been integrated into the churches.
- The deep relationships, shared values and peaceful interaction across Urban Expression – we have had very few relational struggles over the years.
- The relationships between the children and young people associated with our mission partners and their involvement in the recent community festival.
- The sustainability of the model Urban Expression has adopted and the limited time and energy spent on raising funds.
- The thousands of people who have been equipped by the Crucible course and in other ways to engage in holistic mission in marginal



We are challenged by and intend to address:



- Our limited success in raising up local leaders in marginal communities (a struggle shared by many other agencies).
- Whether we have found an appropriate missional balance between ‘presence’ and ‘proclamation’ in our neighbourhoods.
- The fragility of the churches, missional communities and other initiatives our mission partners have pioneered.
- The lack of ethnic diversity within Urban Expression.
- The increasingly acute challenges of food and fuel poverty, austerity, racism, the climate crisis and global insecurity, which impact most severely those with fewest resources.
- The continuing struggle to galvanise a predominantly middle-class church to engage in mission in marginal places and to grapple with the realities of post-Christendom.

Those who founded Urban Expression as an experiment in 1997 did not expect it to still be around – and thriving – in 2022! We are deeply grateful to those who have encouraged and supported us over the years and we hope this report is helpful to you. And we are grateful to the God who has inspired and sustained us over these 25 years, and who leads us on.

STORIES FROM THE MARGINS



Rich Shorter (November 2019):
'Dad, Andy says we can build a bike at Holy Spokes; can we do this for our annual camping trip.'



Every year I camp with each of my kids, quality time and all that, but this year my son wanted us to hang out at a Bristol industrial estate in a bike shop. Well, I say bike shop but youth centre would be a better title, as untidy young people with bikes which matched their ill-fitting clothes and teenage bodies sought out 'free' second-hand parts to make their bikes useable.

Youth centre doesn't do it enough justice, community centre would be better as the garden hosts a picnic bench and old used disposable BBQ's along with badminton net and cricket bats slung on the floor in the same ways they are at home. People feel at home here. The owner of the high-end road bike, the addict looking for a fresh start and a place of rest for weary travelling salesmen seeking a cup of coffee.

Community centre is too bland a comparison for this venue to play board games late into the night and, for two days, a place for a father and son from Essex to experience the pilgrimage of going west to build a bike together.

A business? Professionally run – definitely! Making a profit? Can't be easy to do that when you service people's emotional needs more than their buckled

wheels and rusty chains. What Andy and Rae have built is nothing short of amazing; it was the best father-son camping trip we've had yet.

Perhaps the best word would be a church. A grease-covered habitat to explore faith and identity? Certainly, father and son had many Jesus-centred conversations which were started as a result of being in this bike shop, youth centre, community centre, business, sorry, I mean church.





Beth Honey (November 2020): Our garden has always been an important place of gathering and encounter for Derwent Oak. It is a place we learned to ask for help more than offer it, in the early days of living in Derby, as we asked our neighbours to a gardening party. It is the place we first realised people would help us host a party, and come to one, when we had a bonfire. But when we realised that we wouldn't be able to meet again in homes, which is the heart of Derwent Oak, for many months, the garden began to speak again.

Could we open it, even in lockdown? So, we simply shared a thought on Facebook in our group and on the pages we host and are connected to. Did anyone want us to light a candle on a Thursday evening, for someone or something that mattered to them that they had lost, whether or not due to Covid-19? People have steadily asked us to do that – people we know, friends of friends online, connections through volunteering through the local Covid-19 response hub, and strangers connecting through social media. We dream that slowly people may come to light candles as individuals and small groups, and have begun to commission some local artists to create pieces to enhance the garden as a place of encounter.

Part of the story of this season is lament and grief suppressed by circumstance, and part of the motivation of these candles is to find expression in a place where people often lack confidence to



connect to church, even when the doors are open. A simple invitation closer to home is perhaps what is needed, and outdoors may be a safe space for more reasons than we realise.



Rachel Spence (November 2020): We have set up several expressions of church over the last couple of months within the covid restrictions at the time, which have reached out to people who don't want either a traditional service or a zoom/Facebook service to which every church seems to have defaulted.

Picnic Church: people bring a picnic blanket and food and are provided with a craft kit. We began it in mid-august and did it every two weeks until second lockdown.

Muddy Church: joint expression with the local Methodist Church – it's rained heavily both times. 'Wandering and Wondering' in socially-distanced family bubbles.

Walking Church: exploring inspiring biblical passages while finding God in nature on or just off the estate.

Breathe: a relaxing and meditative gathering with home-grown liturgy and meditations to gentle music. A calm Oasis in the busyness of life.



Rachel Jay (November 2020): We started lockdown operating pretty much as a food bank and delivery service to the elderly and vulnerable - this was very rewarding but also extremely sad, as we heard stories of living through lockdown with no gardens or access to internet and, of course, issues around job loss.

In July, we started serving hot food from the front of the Haven, at first once a week, and through August 5 days a week. We served over 1000 lunches in total! As we did this, volunteers started coming out of the woodwork, all of them people who we had connections with but who hadn't officially volunteered with us before. We have put in place a well-organised scheme to support them and they all sport their Haven T-shirts and ID badges with pride. The Haven has become a real hive of activity with volunteers cooking and serving our community 5 days a week.

In the autumn, we have managed to reopen many of our previous groups in a 'Covid secure' way, including twice a week café, stay-and-play and women's group. As we look to the future of the centre, we do so with excitement: whilst it is no fun living through a pandemic and we know many who have a lot to grieve, we feel more than ever that we are in the right place and excited to work with those whom God has brought to us.

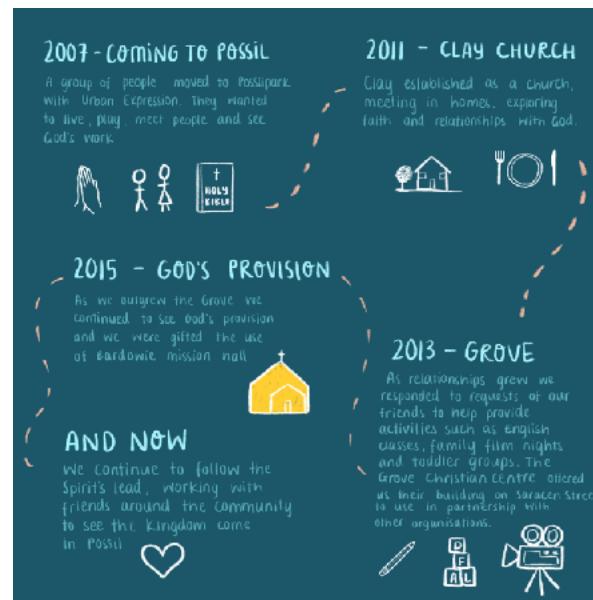


Emma MacIntosh (November 2020): As I reflect back over this last year, there is so much we have to be thankful for. God has been at work in our community and it's been such a privilege to be a part of that.

We've seen people ask Jesus into their lives, people set free from drug addiction and people baptized.

Seeing God at work in the Clay youth group has been a particular encouragement for me. Most of the young people who attend are the same age as my daughter, Iona. I've watched them grow from toddlers to teenagers and none of them, apart from Iona, have any church background or parents who attend church. It's such a blessing to see them growing in their faith as well, developing a relationship with Jesus, choosing to take that path rather than the many others negative ones that are on offer in our community.

As I look to this next decade, I'm excited about what that could look like for Possilpark! I feel like God is saying – greater things are yet to come! As part of this vision, we are aiming to redevelop our buildings to become community assets that bless the community and give us more capacity for discipleship. As we go into this decade, my hope is that we can get this building project done and dusted this year, and get on with changing more lives with Jesus.





Gordon McDade (November 2021): We now operate in two locations in the city, Forthspring Intercommunity Project in west Belfast and the Duncairn Arts Centre in north Belfast. It is an important facet of our work that we are embedded alongside existing community organisations and support and partner where we can. Our model of ministry, which is a chaplaincy model, relies on proximity and relationship building.

Forthspring was formed by a number of Christian communities in west Belfast and celebrates its twenty-five-year anniversary next year. We are building relationships with the new Director and the staff and the wider community. Our aim is to reach out as widely as we can and to start a gathering in the building with a strong emphasis on welcome, hospitality and Celtic Christianity in our expression of community.

At the Duncairn Arts Centre, the portacabin in which we used to gather is still being used by Alcoholics Anonymous. Our foodbank, in which we partner with the local residents' group, has also been well used over recent months with many people from across the communities accessing food and help with gas and electric payment cards. We have partnered with the residents' group in a variety of projects, the most recent of which was a clean-up and window box planting.



In both of our locations we are engaging with the challenge of what it means to build the peace between the two communities on either side of the peace walls and separate areas.

In response both to the pandemic and to an increased interest in our work, we have started a private Soulspace Facebook group, which has so far attracted more than two hundred members, which has really encouraged us and shown us that we have many friends and fellow travellers with us. We are considering what this private space might look like and how we can minister to a broad and varied community within it. We value the virtual space and recognise its potential to express our vision and values. It is both local and global and therefore brings unique challenges with it.





Ian Dyson (May 2022): One of my highlights has been walking to school with a mum and her daughter after our breakfast club.

Her daughter greets everyone we meet on the street with a cheery hello. Normally people tend to keep themselves to themselves unless it is family members or long-standing friends. Her enthusiasm is undimmed every day as she does her familiar greetings.

What is remarkable about this story is that the young girl and her mum from Africa had made the journey by dinghy across the English Channel a few months ago. The school brought the family to us only weeks after 27 migrants died making a similar trip. Both were very withdrawn at first, but her mum was open to coming along to our groups and at Orts our weekly Women's Knitting collective the mum shared some of her story.

Her dad had been imprisoned due to war at home, she had then moved through various countries until staying in Germany for a while before finding herself in Hull. When asked where she has been the happiest, she replied 'I have never known happiness.' My prayer on hearing this was that God would give her joy and memories right here in this little corner of Hull so that she could say 'I am happy here'.



On the school walks the mum laughs at her daughter's profuse welcome for everybody and it feels like the journey to stability and hope has started. I am encouraged that our work, day in day out that involves putting up chairs, getting cereals out etc often doesn't feel like radical Gospel work, but it provides a regular safe space for families to come into. The beginning of trauma healing is based on consistent safety, whether that be from war, domestic abuse or the everyday challenges of poverty in our community.





Caleb Shorter (17): I grew up in a town shunned by the news, neglected by politics, rejected by the local area, underfunded by the council, but blessed by God. This description of Harold Hill can lead

Christians to ask: Where do you find God in a place like this? How can people find God in a place like this? I can imagine my parents felt planting a church in Harold Hill was like planting a seed in a drought. I was too young to remember when we moved there.

The church was tailored to the needs of the people of the community we were based in. We would meet on a weekday in the evening, eating a large meal buffet style. Everyone brought a dish to add to the feast. We also shared communion, Jesus' body being represented by crisps, poppadoms, or the usual bread. The blood of Jesus being represented by juice, water and occasionally very strong squash when my dad used double-strength squash without realising it, surprising church members with the bitter taste. My parents worked very hard in the community to find ways to bring people to Jesus. Many struggled with prayer, so my parents made guides to do this, which made it much easier. God blessed the church with opportunities to open deep discussions. As a child, I was never a part of these discussions. However, I did get reports back from dad about what the adults were discussing while they were washing up.

I do not have a negative view of Harold Hill, and I do not share opinions presented by the news or the

local area. I am grateful for the time spent there as it gave me a completely different outlook from some of my friends who I am at school with now.

While the goal was to go and set up a church in Harold hill, I think personally the biggest achievement of my parents and the various

members of Church 1v23 was the simplicity of being a great Christian witness to the local area. People who would not always necessarily believe in God or attend church would ask for prayer or ask for ethical guidance. God managed to use the people of Church 1v23 to have great outreach and spread his word.



As I got older, I started to understand how my parents' relationships really benefited others. I saw lots of families dependent on them. At the time this was frustrating, but now as I look back, I see a great beauty in it. My mum was a great carer for the community, looking after

families of the church. I remember one time being at rugby training, calling her and asking why had she not picked me up yet. Something that day had happened with one of the families at church. She just dropped what she was doing to care for them. At the time you can imagine I was cold and pretty annoyed my mum wasn't there to let me get to take

me home to a warm bath. However, God used her to shelter and look after a family so broken that the police were involved.

It is impossible for people not to notice this amazing discipleship. Something I look up to her for. My mum being able to be a backbone to families who need it, families who we would have probably not met if my dad had decided to become a normal Baptist minister in a conventional church.

I would come home from school and wonder where dad was. He was often doing very similar work to my mother. Many lads in the church had no father figure around and often the father was in and out of the picture. My dad was my dad but looking back I can also name a few for whom my dad was also their father figure, teaching them skills that their mothers could not. This is really special for me. I can't imagine not having my dad, and I am so grateful for just being a good example to me. My parents offered such a unique service to the people of Harold Hill. They were like a 24hr response team: they often put themselves last, as do many members of Urban Expression.

Growing up as a part of a UE church is something I am so grateful for. Growing up in a UE church, I often questioned why would my parents disappear for the evening, why would we go to a church and not sing like all the other churches we go to do? We do we eat in the middle of our church? As I have grown older, I understand why and there is such beauty in it. I think it is really good to look at any UE

church like this. The question my dad often asks is 'who would Jesus look after?' Jesus looked for the outcasts in society and healed them; he ate with them, slept under their roofs and he died on the cross with them next to him. UE takes this outlook on Christianity and nails it.

Growing up in UE I often questioned what my parents did and their work in the community. Now I understand the great effect God's work through them had on the community. I was asked to reflect on what it is like to grow up in a UE church. It has been tough at times, but it has given me such a great outlook on life.

I am really lucky to have grown up on Harold Hill. I have met so many lovely people, had so many lovely conversations and have been cared for by so many people society will teach shouldn't be around children. Growing up in Harold Hill has been a great foundation for my faith, which I look forward to building on with more adventures with God.

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