

CALL TO CHANGE

A four week course on Christian faith and
community organising



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community organising

CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY CENTRE
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CALL TO CHANGE

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Introduction

The heart of the Gospel is that ultimate *power* and ultimate *love* are both found in Jesus Christ. On Good Friday, as we stand at the foot of the cross, we see the depth of Christ's *love* for us. On Easter Day, we see his *power*, even over death itself.

We know that power will triumph eternally, but we are also called to be signs of that triumph here and now. Jesus himself taught us to pray 'thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.' **"Call to Change"** is designed to help your church respond to that call – to help it become a more effective sign of God's power *and* his love. It has been written by and for Christians who have found broad-based community organising a powerful method of working for the kingdom of God in their local neighbourhood. They come from a wide range of churches. The team who have developed and trialled this course include leaders from Anglican, Methodist, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic and Salvation Army congregations in East London. Working with **Citizens UK** – the national community organising movement – they have already won over £70 million for low-paid workers through its Living Wage Campaign, and persuaded the Government to end the detention of children seeking sanctuary. In the process, they have raised up a new generation of leaders, and strengthened their internal and relationships.

“Call to Change” is built around the story of the Prophet Nehemiah. Like us, he lived in a broken city. Like us, God called him up to rebuild his city – physically economically *and* spiritually. Through Nehemiah’s story, the course introduces the methods of community organising, and shows how they help us to respond a faithfully and powerfully to God’s call today.

Angus Ritchie

Director, Contextual Theology Centre

Feast of the Conversion of St Paul, 2012

Purpose and format

“Call to Change” is a four-week course, with a mixture of Bible study and practical activities, aimed at introducing Christians to broad-based community organising.

Ideally, those attending the course will be committed members of your church, who have already shown some degree of interest in, or potential for, involvement in community organising.

By the end of the course, the aim is that they:

- have a sense of how the different practices of organising — one-to-one meetings, assemblies and campaigns—are part of a single process of building and using relational power (Weeks 1 & 2);
- have experience of conducting one-to-one relational meetings, within their own church, another denomination and another faith (Weeks 2 & 3 plus homework);
- have deepened their relationship with another church from a very different tradition (Week 3);
- understand that this form of organising is not some ‘add-on’ to the core activity of the church, but is a way of strengthening the *whole* of your church’s life (Week 4);

- are able to relate broad-based organising to Biblical examples of leadership, community-building and social action – and in particular the work of the Prophet Nehemiah (Whole course);
- have identified some further activity they wish to take (relationship-building and/or campaigning), and made a realistic plan of action (Week 4).

Rough timings are given for a 90-minute session. With such a variety of denominations involved in designing this course – Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals, Roman Catholics and Salvation Army congregations – we’ve deliberately stuck to providing a course *outline* for you to fill in with more detailed teaching, and stories and examples from your congregation’s life.

Week 1: Taking Responsibility

Aims of this session

- **building relationships** within the group;
- introducing the **Prophet Nehemiah**, and the relevance of his story today;
- exploring the role of **listening, prayer and repentance** in achieving real change;
- connecting **repentance** with **taking responsibility**.

5 mins

Opening Prayer

This is an opportunity to lift up the course—and the life of your congregation and neighbourhood—before God in prayer.

10 mins

Rounds

Some groups will be familiar with the ‘rounds’ (in which case it is worth asking them, rather than telling them, why all Citizens UK meetings begin with this). Just as our opening prayer reminds us that we are in God’s presence—and that our relationship with him, and our waiting on his will must be the first foundation for any action—so ‘rounds’ remind us of one another’s presence, and of the priority of relationship over action in the work of broad-based organising.

People should be invited to give...

...their name;

...the neighbourhood in which they live (if all from one church) or the church they attend (if in a mixed group);

...one thing that makes them angry or saddened about the state of their neighbourhood.

5 mins

Introducing the course

This section is delivered by the leader—so please present the material below in your own words, and your own way.

This course is based around a prophet who isn't particularly famous—the **Prophet Nehemiah**. Nehemiah is significant because he helped rebuild his people's city.

Some generations before Nehemiah, Israel had been conquered by the Babylonian empire, and all of its leaders taken into exile. Later, some Jews were allowed back to Jerusalem—which had been ruined by the invaders.

The story of Nehemiah matters to us because of the things that 'ruin' our neighbourhoods—the ways in which the places we love and treasure are broken (*here you may want to draw on the issues raised in the rounds*).

Nehemiah couldn't rebuild the city on his own. To rebuild a city, he first had to build a people of power. And he could only do that in *God's* power.

Nehemiah has been chosen for these studies because the way he got Jerusalem restored has lessons for us—as we try to put right what is broken in our city through community organising.

Nehemiah is one of the Jews still in Babylon—but he comes to hear how his home city is ruined. The Book of Nehemiah tells the story of how the city gets rebuilt.

[Further reading: Robert Linthicum's excellent book *Building a People of Power* provides a more detailed exploration of these themes, and is a useful companion to this course, and to Christian engagement in community organising more generally]

[Optional discussion: *Spend time in pairs discussing in more detail the ways in which your city is 'broken', and what you feel needs to be repaired.*]

30 mins **Bible Study**

Read Nehemiah 1 together.

Set the scene for the Bible study: Nehemiah is far off in Babylon, but has a great love for his home city of Jerusalem. How does he act on that love?

Draw out the different things Nehemiah does:

1. He listens

2. He identifies with, and shares, the pain of his people

3. He prays – lifting the problems of the city to God, because he recognises that real change requires God's initiative

4. He takes responsibility.

There are different ways of expanding on these themes. It might be useful to spend some time focussing on the importance of listening. You might ask the group to consider the questions below:

When have we felt listened to?

What are the qualities of a good listener we know?

Do we find it easy to listen?

When has listening enabled us to see a problem in a new way?

What stops us from listening well?

When does our church listen to its neighbours?

Then spend some time focusing on the place of prayer in the story. Nehemiah doesn't act until he has listened to his fellow Jews, and listened to God. You may want to ask:

How do we lift the needs of our neighbourhood before God?
How can we listen as well as speak to God when we pray for our neighbourhoods?

*Make a link between **praying** and **taking responsibility**. Point out that Nehemiah's main prayer is a prayer of repentance. He says sorry for his own sins and the sins of his people. (You may want to explain that Lent—the 40 days before Easter—is a season when many Christians focus on repentance.)*

Spend some time discussing the nature of repentance—using some of the material below:

Repentance needs to be **realistic**. We're not responsible for all the problems of our neighbourhoods. We need to be careful not to blame those who are poor for their poverty—the Bible suggests it is frequently those with wealth and power who are to blame (cf. Amos 2.6&7 and James 2.6&7). Sometimes our responsibility lies less in having *caused* the problems of our neighbourhood than in our passive acceptance of them.

Repentance is also a **hopeful** activity. The word in the New Testament for repentance is *metanoia*—it means 'turning' (just as the word 'Lent' comes from the Latin word for 'growth')! If the way the world has gone wrong is partly down to our action (or *inaction*) that means that if we behave differently—if we 'turn' and change the direction of our lives, by God's power—things can be different. In that way, repenting is the opposite of

moaning! Too often, when we discuss what's wrong with our neighbourhoods we end up in an extended moan, casting ourselves in the role of passive victim. Repentance means seeing ourselves as active not passive—agents through whom God can work to make real change happen.

[Optional discussion: *Get people to discuss in pairs, the times when they have experienced a positive change—or made a positive difference, either in personal relationships or in the life of their church or neighbourhood. Ask them—what made those changes possible?*]

[Optional discussion: Gospel parallels

*The group's primary interest is (rightly!) in following Jesus, rather than Nehemiah. So if possible, leave time to connect the story of Nehemiah with the example of Jesus Christ. You may want to draw on readings you have been studying or preaching on in church—or ask the group to make connections between the lessons in Nehemiah and passages in the Gospels. Passages you could use this week include **Matthew 4.1-11/Mark 1.1-14**—Jesus' public ministry also begins with listening—40 days alone with God in the wilderness and **Mark 1.15**—Jesus' preaching begins with the invitation to repent.]*

10 mins **Looking forward**

It's essential that you leave time for this section. Reinforce the key messages of this session—namely, the importance of

relationships and responsibility in changing our neighbourhoods for the better.

Then spend a bit of time drawing parallels with community organising. How you do this will depend on how much the people present already know about community organising. The key aim is to explain that, for Christians, community organising offers us a way to be 'Nehemiahs' in our own time—to 'build a people of power' who can rebuild our city, through listening to one another and to God.

5 mins

Homework / Closing Prayers

Give people copies of the One-to-ones and Community Organising leaflet – and ask them to read the leaflet before the next session. Explain it is about how we might listen more effectively to one another – in order to act together for the good of our city.

Week 2: Building Relationships

Aims of this session

- to show how Nehemiah **built relationships** to achieve change;
- to introduce the **one-to-one meeting** as a way of building power;
- give people experience of doing **one-to-ones**.

10 mins

Opening Prayer & Rounds

Ask people all to answer the following question:

In this session we will consider how a community can build its power. How do you react to the word 'power'?

10 mins

The Bible and power

Spend some time exploring the different kinds of power in Scripture. Explain that power is sometimes portrayed negatively—when it is used to oppress and dominate (e.g. in Pharaoh's oppression the people of Israel before the Exodus). But the good news at the heart of the Scriptures is that ultimate power is held by the God of love.

Ask people to give examples of the ways God's power is portrayed in Scripture. (If people need prompting, these might include—

God's creative power (Genesis 1); ***God's liberating power*** (in freeing the Israelites from Pharaoh; ***God's power over the forces of death and destruction*** (in the resurrection of Jesus Christ).)

Get people to read 1 John 4.16-19. Contrast the power which simply intimidates and oppresses with the transforming power of love—power exercised with, and not over others.

10 mins

Bible study - Nehemiah

*Ask the group to read at least part of Nehemiah 3—the story of how the Jews begin to rebuild the city walls. Explain the significance of his great list of names—that Nehemiah wasn't able to rebuild the city on his own, but needed to identify leaders and inspire their trust. Link this back in with the first thing we learnt about Nehemiah, last week—that his ministry began with ***listening to others***.*

Explain that if we want to 'build a people of power', we need to get to know our people—conveying in your own way the material below:

If we don't bother spending time finding out what makes someone tick—their passions and interests—we won't be able to build the kind of team Nehemiah built—which means we won't be able to rebuild our broken city.

In community organising, we call this ‘finding out someone’s self-interest’. There’s a big difference between self-interest and selfishness! Someone’s self-interest is the things they care about.

If we don’t learn about people’s self interest we’re left with:

Stereotypes

Generalisations

Assumptions

Caricatures (from tabloids and elsewhere)

Projections (imagining everyone thinks like we do...)

Fixed first impressions

It’s only if we know what is on their heart that we can build a team. And even more importantly, it’s only if we know what is on their hearts that we can discern what the Holy Spirit is doing in their lives—so that we’re building on God’s work, not inventing our own!

25 mins **‘Stick person’ exercise**

The aim of this exercise is to get people to think about their own passions and ‘self-interest’. For most of the section, people will be working on their own, with a sheet of paper, making a list of their own priorities and concerns.

For the first five minutes, you need to present your own 'stick person'—a simple diagram with a stick picture of yourself in the middle, and around it words which describe

- The key institutions (schools, congregations, workplaces etc) which have been central to your life*
- Your key relationships (both public and private—with no need for intimate details)*
- Your key habits, drives and ambitions ('what makes you tick')*
- A couple of key events or stories which have shaped your life*
- Hobbies and interests; things you like to read/watch*
- Your worst fears and anxieties*
- How you spend time, energy and money*

Ask members of the group to spend 15 minutes in quiet, constructing their own 'stick person', and promise no-one will have to share anything they don't want to!

Draw people back together, to say a little about how they found the exercise. (You may wish to prime someone in advance, who would be willing to share something of their stick person—but ensure no-one is pressured to do so)

5 mins Introducing 'one to ones'

Explain that the purpose of one-to-one relational meetings is to find out something about the self-interest, the passions, of other people in your church and neighbourhood. We want to know

what in their experience and motivation will give them the energy to act in public life, changing their congregation and neighbourhood for the better.

*Connect the 'one-to-one' back to the stick person. Explain that a good 'one-to-one' should enable you to draw a 'stick person' of the person you're talking with. So good questions to focus on are ones with **why** in them: Why is something important? Why are people interested in this or that? Why do they value something? Why do they act on this and not that?*

Select another (pre-briefed) person in the group to model a 5-minute 'one-to-one'—making sure that there's balance, with each of you asking and answering

15 mins **Doing one-to-ones**

*Get people into pairs, doing one-to-ones together (you can join in if there are otherwise an odd number—it **must** be done in pairs not threes or fours). Tell people when it gets to half time—so that if one of the pair has done most of the questioning in the first half, the other can take more of a lead in the second.*

10 mins **Plenary**

Ask people for reactions—What worked? What didn't? What would have made it a better conversation, yielding more depth without being intrusive?

Explain that next week, your church will meet with another congregation doing the course, for a series of one-to-one meetings between people of different churches. Make clear the timing and venue if this is different from usual—and how to get there (individually or as a group)

5 mins

Homework and Closing Prayer

Ask people to do a 'one-to-one' with someone else from their church or workplace in the week – and to think about someone they know of a different faith whom they might be able to 'one to one' the following week. Close the meeting in prayer.

Week 3: Journeying Out

Aims of this session

- give people experience of doing **one-to-ones** with a different community;
- **build relationships** between your church and another local congregation.

In this session, two different Lent groups will come together for an evening of one-to-ones, in one or other venue. This is a different kind of session – instead of Bible study and teaching, the session will focus almost entirely on relationship building. We suggest there is tea and coffee available before the start, that the session starts promptly, and that there is a longer time for tea and fellowship at the end.

It will be important for the leaders of the two groups to meet in the week before this course, to talk about how it has gone so far, and how to co-lead the evening

If your church is not doing this course with another – or if you want a more intentional focus on the issue of the financial crisis – you may wish to replace this session with a ‘Community Conversation’ on the financial crisis. Materials for such an exercise are on the ‘call to change’ website (<http://calltochange.org>)

5 min **Welcome / Opening Prayer**

By a minister from the host church

10 mins **Rounds**

Ask people to give their own name, state the church they come from, and describe a recent conversation which has energised or inspired them. (Remind people they may want to draw on their homework one-to-one.)

10 mins **Introducing your churches**

A brief presentation should be given by the course leader from each church (or someone they have nominated)—to give the other congregation a feel for their history, values and practice, and how and why they have got involved in London Citizens.

5 mins **Reminder of purpose of one-to-ones**

Ideally this should be done by the leader from the visiting church—summarising the purpose of the one-to-one meeting—in terms of the way we learn one another's passions/'self-interest', and the power we have when people from different churches and cultures organise together.

Key things to stress:

- ‘Why?’ questions are crucial
- Share motivations, but don’t get into intrusive personal details
- Feel free to say you don’t want to answer a question
- Make sure there’s a balance between asking and answering questions

30 mins **One-to-ones**

There should be two sets of 15 minute one-to-ones, with a short plenary after the first for questions/feedback/evaluation—and tips on what could make a one-to-one better

10 mins **Our neighbourhood**

At the end of the second one-to-one, ask people to stay in their pair for another five minutes, to discuss: If you could change one thing in the neighbourhood, what would it be, and why?

Spend 5 mins sharing/discussing the responses in a plenary session.

15 mins **Bible Study**

This should be led by the host church leader.

Look briefly at Nehemiah 1.11b–2.8, Explain that as well as building relationships within the Jewish community, Nehemiah thought about the other key relationships he had—in particular with the king. Being the king’s cupbearer (1.11) was a crucial position in the Babylonian empire. How did Nehemiah use that position to good effect?

Finish by explaining that London Citizens also seeks to build relationships beyond the church:

- We relate to other religious and civic groups, so we can act together on issues of common concern
- We build relationships with people with different kinds of power—maybe not kings, but politicians, public officials and business leaders

If possible, illustrate this with some stories from your own experience in community organising. Explain that we can use ‘one-to-ones’ both to build relationships within the Body of Christ, and to build relationships beyond the church.

5 mins

Homework and Closing Prayer

Remind people they will be back to their own church next week. The homework this week is to have a one-to-one conversation with someone of a different faith.

Week 4: Next Steps

Aims of this session

- to review the learning already done, **identifying areas which need more teaching**;
- to show how Nehemiah **moved from relationship to action**;
- to make a **plan of action** for this congregation.

10 mins

Opening Prayer & Rounds

Ask people to answer the following questions:

What did you expect when you decided to attend this course?

What has surprised you about it? (This can be a positive or negative surprise!)

15 mins

Review of previous sessions

Spend some time reviewing the key teaching points of the previous sessions:

In the first session we looked at

- the importance of **taking responsibility** for the state of our city;
- the importance of **prayer, repentance and listening** in changing it.

In the second session we looked at

- the importance of **building relationships** if we want to change our city for the better;
- the **one-to-one** as a tool for doing this (via the ‘stick person’ exercise).

In the third session, we **journeyed out**—putting this teaching into practice

Begin by getting people’s reactions. This will probably focus initially on the previous session, and how that experience was for them. But remind them of the previous teaching sessions, and assess how much has been taken on board—and whether there are teaching points you need to go over again before moving on.

You may need a further 10 mins (or more!) here just to re-teach material from previous sessions

20 mins **Bible study - Nehemiah**

Ask the group to read at least part of Nehemiah 5.1-14—the story of how some Jews were exploiting others through charging excessive interest rates. You may want to spend some time discussing that particular issue, (further materials are available at <http://calltochange.org> – including an excellent paper by Luke Bretherton)

After that, turn the focus to how Nehemiah achieves change. Explain that one-to-ones are the foundation—as in Nehemiah’s day they identify the issues of concern and build the community’s capacity to act, to challenge injustice and hold power to account. But they only achieve change when they lead on into action.

Encourage the group to identify the action Nehemiah takes, including

gathering the people in assembly
identifying who has the power to achieve change
holding them to account

Why might this be effective? Are there echoes of this in other passages of Scripture, or episodes of church history.

A direct parallel would be Moses assembling the people before going with Aaron to Pharaoh (Exodus 4.29f) or the role of South African churches in resistance to apartheid. We also find echoes in the ways prophets such as Amos and John the Baptist speak truth to power.

Draw out the parallels between this and the way community organising works:

Assemblies draw together hundreds, sometimes thousands, of people from our member communities, to hold politicians and business to account.

The **issues** are identified through one-to-ones, house meetings and borough caucuses.

Teams of local people then meet to identify who has the power to change things for the better (e.g. politicians and public and private sector managers) and how they might be persuaded to do that.

Those with power are then invited to our assemblies, and held to account by *our* power – which comes from the relationships we have built.

25 mins **Where next?**

This final section has been deliberately left open-ended. Where the group needs to go next is for you and them to explore.

1. It may be that the congregation needs to kick-start a one-to-one process. If so discuss how more people might be drawn into the process. Possibilities include

- a sermon on the subject with time in/after the service for one-to-ones?
- getting the group to meet for some more weeks, as a team doing one-to-ones (make sure this is a time-limited commitment!).

2. It may be that you are already involved in community organising have got a good team of leaders, and the challenge is now to move into action. If so, identify what kind of action:

- Is there appetite for more engagement with other faiths? If so, might something like the joint meeting last week with another church be followed up by a joint meeting with a mosque or synagogue?
- Is there appetite for action on a specific and significant issue? If it is a **new** issue (i.e. there is no existing Citizens UK campaign), how might people in the group start to respond to the issue alongside other member communities in London Citizens (e.g. by engaging in some initial research, and planning action in discussion the Borough Organiser and the Borough Caucus)? If it is an issue on which Citizens UK is **already acting** (e.g. Living Wage, Affordable Housing, CitySafe or a cap on interest rates), how might people in the group get more involved?
- Is there appetite for action—but not yet a single clear issue? If so, how might more listening be done in the congregation—and with other member communities in the area, before moving into action?

It is important for planning to be realistic, in terms of people's time commitments and the busyness of church life! Ask people to think about what they might need to do less of, if they are to make time for this kind of ongoing work.

20 mins

Closing reflection and worship

In closing, lead a brief evaluation. How are people feeling? How has the course spoken to them? What questions/ideas/actions are they now left with?

Ask people to write down one thing they are committed to doing differently (or doing for the first time) in the light of the course. Place those commitments in a bowl—and spend some time in prayer, offering these intentions to God, and asking that by his power they might bear fruit.

Depending on your church tradition, you may wish to close with a more extended time of open prayer, or with Compline (Night Prayer) with intercessions about the people on the course, and in your wider congregation and neighbourhood.

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ARC (A Radical Church - Pentecostal), Forest Gate (Newham)

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Catholic Parish of Our Lady of the Assumption, Bethnal Green (Tower Hamlets)

Catholic Parish of SS Stephen & Nicholas, Manor Park (Newham)

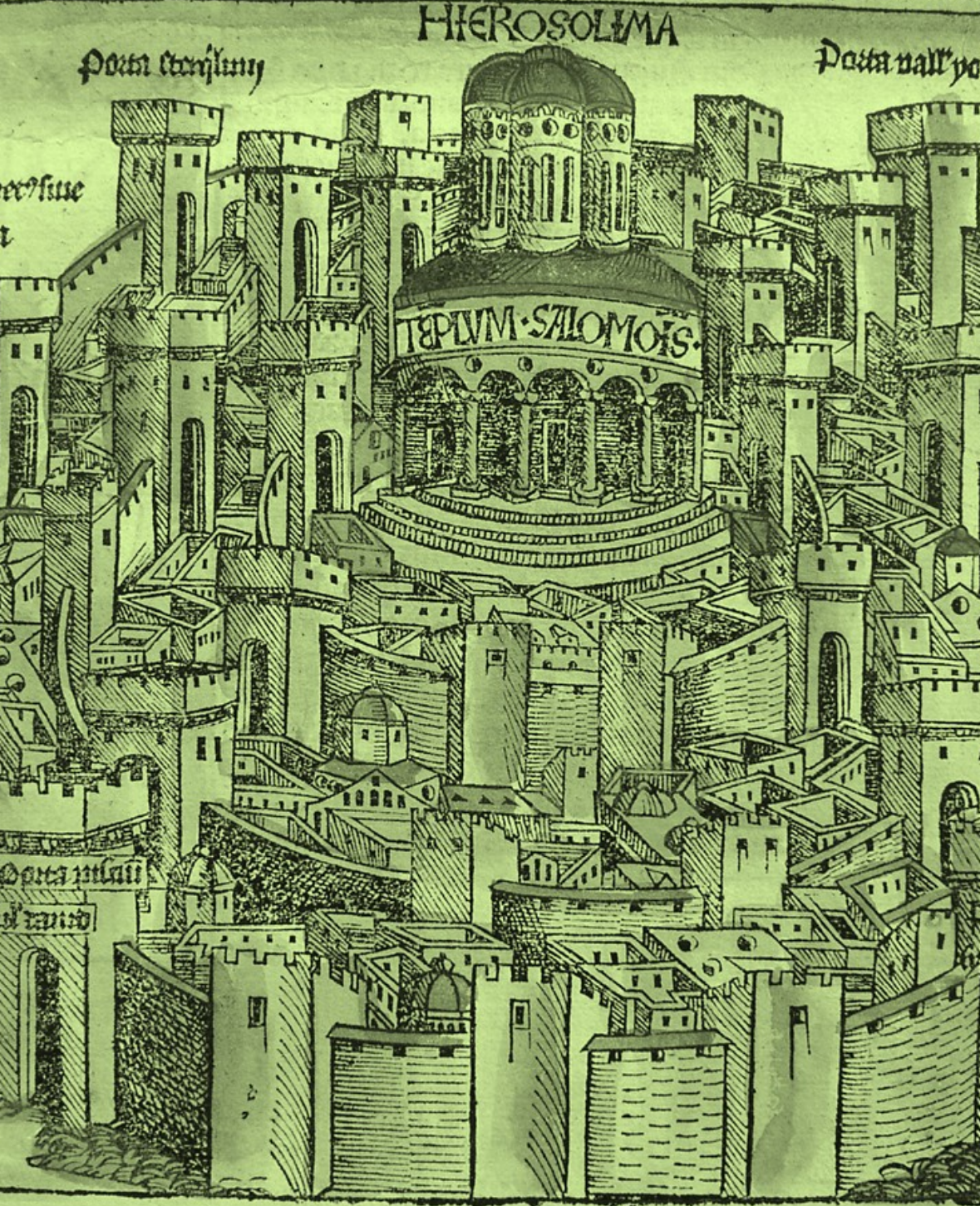
E1 Community Church, Shadwell (Tower Hamlets)

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