EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 5

Evangelical Review of Theology

Articles and book reviews selected from publications worldwide for an international readership, interpreting the Christian faith for contemporary living.

GENERAL EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS

Having said all this, the conclusion to this paper remains open. One thing is certain, however, the Spirit is like the wind and He moves whichever way He chooses.

——————————

Dr. Tokunboh Adeyemo is General Secretary of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM), Nairobi, Kenya.

Urban Explosion and Missions Strategy

Timothy Monsma

Reprinted from Evangelical Missions Quarterly, Jan. '81*, with permission*

Culture shock leading to both apathy and violence is escalating in the cities of the world, especially in the less affluent nations. Staggering population growth together with the widening gap between rich and middle class people living in high rise apartments and poor people living in slums challenge the urban Church to new dimensions of mission. Today it is the cities that put Christianity on trial. This article calls the Church to new priorities in missionary strategy.
(Editor)

WORLDWIDE URBANIZATION

An Overview

Recent United Nations statistics on worldwide urbanization numb the imagination. The following chart gives some picture of what is happening: Of the 60 giant cities (5,000,000 or more population) projected for the year 2000, 45 (or 75%) will be in less developed countries. Many of these countries are fertile areas for mission work today. Opportunity beckons.

CITIES OF THE WORLD HAVING POPULATIONS OF 5 MILLION & OVER[1]
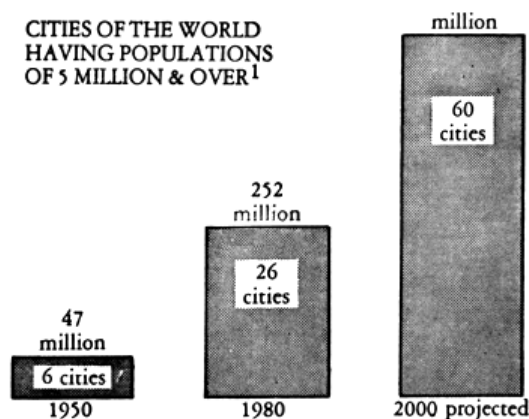
The growth of smaller cities is also important, in Latin America three of every four persons will be living in a city by the year 2000. In Africa, cities of all sizes are growing

rapidly, while in the United States the farming population has dropped from around 25% in 1930 to about 4% today.

Conclusion: Worldwide urbanization is a reality that any mission strategy for the future must take into account.

Cities as Centres of Dominance

Louis Wirth and Robert Redfield are among the fathers of urban anthropology. In his early writings Redfield tended to idealize the advantages of rural life and to emphasize the problems of urban life. But in his more mature years he increasingly emphasized cites as centres of the "Great Tradition" and pointed out that cities are centres of cultural dominance. The city dominates its hinterland and takes the lead in cultural changes that come to a society.

Horace Miner developed these ideas still further when he defined the city not in terms of its physical appearance, but in terms of its function within society. He called the city a "center of dominance". Wheatley and Aernsberg referred to cities as "nodes" of dominance. Uzzell and Provencher agree with this approach.[2]

If cultural change tends to spread from the city to the countryside, this is also true of religious change, for religion is part of culture. Roland Allen maintained that Paul was very much aware of this dynamic when he chose to preach in the cities of the Roman Empire.[3] But McGavran has responded that Paul went to the cities because this is where Jews were found.[4]

The question is one of intention and effect. Paul intended to preach "to the Jew first".[5] But the effect of this intent was that he went to cities. From these cities the gospel spread until it covered the entire area in which the cities were found. Ephesus is a good example. Paul ministered in the city of Ephesus, but: "This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks."[6]

If it is true that cities are centres of cultural and religious dominance, this has tremendous implications for missionary strategy. It means that even in those countries where the majority are still living in small towns or on the farms, urban ministries ought to receive top priority.

There is an increasing willingness in missionary circles to recognize this priority. Recently the Intercristo missionary service organization did a computer check at my request on the number of openings for prospective missionaries in urban work. There are hundreds of openings on all continents.

A THREE-PRONGED MISSION STRATEGY

---

[2] Edwin Eames and Judith Granich Goode, *Anthropology of the City* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977), pp.9–13.

[3] Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), pp.12, 13.

[4] Donald McGavran, *Bridges of God* (London: World Dominion Press, 1955), p.30.

[5] Romans 1:16.

[6] Acts 19:10.

Evangelize the City

The cities of the world need evangelism, or discipling as described in [Matthew 28:19](), [20](). Here the primary concern is to introduce urbanites to the Lord Jesus Christ and to affiliation with his body, the church. Various methods have been used successfully in different parts of the world. I will briefly cite some of the more popular methods along with some examples, and then move on to the second aspect of a helpful urban strategy.

1. House Churches. House churches are a very useful way to get started in places where there is no church or where there might be government opposition to public meetings and/or the building of mission chapels. It certainly is an economical way to proceed. House churches are often accompanied by door-to-door calling either to find a place to meet or to invite people to attend services that are already under way. If all goes well, the house church will outgrow the house and larger facilities must eventually be found.

Roger Greenway has described the successful use of this method in *An Urban Strategy for Latin America* and also in *Guidelines for Urban Church Planting*.[7]

2. Mass Evangelism. A problem associated with the traditional mass evangelistic meetings is that many who decide for Christ never validate their decision by way of active membership in a local church. Peter Wagner tells us that the Pentecostals have been the fastest growing Protestant group in Latin America.[8] They have developed a type of mass evangelism that is effective in gaining new church members. People are led to Christ not in a stadium or some other neutral place, but in the Pentecostal churches. For example, there is a congregation of Methodist Pentecostals in Santiago, Chile, that sends about thirty preaching teams into the streets every Sunday evening. They preach and sing and invite people to go with them to church. Many do. In the church building they confess Christ as Saviour and Lord, and begin a new life in him.

3. The Family Web. Donald McGavran has described web movements as a type of people movement.[9] With a people movement many members of a clan or other group move toward Christianity together, reinforcing one another in the faith. With a web movement, the decision to embrace Christianity is not a simultaneous decision on the part of all concerned, but rather is a chain reaction decision following the lines of least resistance especially among relatives. In a recent book McGavran emphasizes "the high evangelistic potential of the urban monoethnics."[10] This suggests that web movements are still doing well in the cities of India.

Web movements are also highly effective in the cities of Africa.[11] This does not mean that other methods of evangelism are not useful in Africa. But it does suggest that the African sense of solidarity with the extended family and the clan must not be neglected, regardless of what other methods are used.

4. Christian Compassion. J. H. Bavinck calls missionaries to Christian compassion for the physical needs of others by reminding them that the preaching of Jesus "was ever enclosed

---

[7] Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973 and 1976.

[8] Peter Wagner, *Look Out! The Pentecostals Are Coming* (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1975).

[9] Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p.320.

[10] *Ethnic Realities and the Church* (Pasadena: William Carey, 1979), p.176.

[11] Timothy Monsma, *An Urban Strategy for Africa* (Pasadena: William Carey, 1979),p.90.

within the framework of his deeds. His deeds illustrated, classified, and undergirded his preaching."[12]

Missionary Cornelius Persenaire made specific efforts to meet the physical needs of the people in the barrio in which he was working in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. These efforts included a milk-feeding programme, literacy classes, a medical clinic, and a day care centre.[13] The programmes are promoting the evangelistic programme in that part of Tegucigalpa.

When James Hefley began working in inner city Chicago, he wanted to preach and teach only. But when he came face to face with monumental physical needs, and when he remembered that evangelical foreign missionaries had been ministering to the whole man—both soul and body—for a long time, he decided that his ministry too must be comprehensive.[14] For many evangelicals in the inner city, one must preach the truth and one must do the truth by acts of kindness and helpfulness. This doing is part of the message that is to be communicated.

Conclusion: Good strategy uses the most effective means it can find to evangelize urbanites.

Extend the Church to the City

McGavran speaks of three types of numerical church growth: internal growth, transfer growth, and conversion growth. The first prong of the three-pronged urban strategy was to "Disciple the City". The chief concern was conversion growth.

Now the second prong will be considered, and here the main concern is with transfer growth. If one brings a multitude of people into the church, through the front door, but loses them as they transfer out the back door as fast as they come in the front door, the growth rate for that church will be zero. Transfer growth is not to be despised.

The Christians who were in Rome prior to Paul's visit to that city, are a biblical example of transfer growth. Paul wrote a letter before he ever got to Rome. Some of them went out to meet Paul when they heard he was on his way to Rome.[15] As far as is known, no apostle had visited Rome prior to Paul's visit. The Roman Christians had been converted in Jerusalem and elsewhere. Then they carried their Christianity with them to Rome, establishing a community of believers in this strategic city. That which happened in the first century can and must happen today.

In this connection one can observe a difference between the work in Latin America and the work in Africa and Asia. All of Latin America is nominally Roman Catholic. Work in a rural area that is nominally Catholic can be difficult. But in the city people have greater freedom to forsake the traditions and strike out in new directions, including new religious directions. The Pentecostals, mentioned earlier, have had their greatest growth in the cities of Latin America.

In Africa and Asia, on the other hand, both Protestants and Catholics are relatively new on the scene. They compete—if that's the right word—on an equal basis. Here it is often fully as easy to reach people in their rural homes before they move to the city as to reach

---

[12]

[13] Roger Greenway, *Guidelines for Urban Church Planting* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976).

[14] James and Marty Hefley, *The Church That Takes on Trouble* (Elgin, IL: David C. Cook, 1976).

[15] Acts 28:15.

them in the city. The result is that, in some countries at least, many are already committed, evangelical Christians when they migrate to the urban areas. Here the problem of conserving the gains already made becomes more critical.

It must be frankly admitted that the growth of formal schooling and the expansion of cities encourages the secular outlook. Under the secular outlook religion either becomes nominal or is squeezed out altogether. This is not to say that secular humanism is a necessary consequence of schooling and urbanization. It is simply to recognize that this is the way it often goes. A knowledge of the disease is the first step toward finding a cure. That is why I mention this problem.

In the city of Nagpur in India 14,000 reported themselves as Christians in the 1971 census. But all the city churches put together had only 3,000 members.[16] There was a failure of transfer growth.

The problem of attrition from the church is also found in Latin America. "A recent study conducted in Central America indicates that nearly 80 per cent of Protestant youth who enter the secular universities are lost to the church."[17]

In Africa the further one goes in secondary school or the university, the more likely he is to leave the faith. Stevens, Tate, Riddle, Schwartz, and Shorter all mention and illustrate the problem of attrition away from the church in Africa.[18] Secularism has entered Africa through the schools, through secular literature, and through the entertainment media. Urbanization tends to encourage secularization unless helpful antidotes are administered.

While the message of the church in this situation is very important, there will be no message at all in the cities of the world unless there is a physical presence. Too many American Christians have given up on the city—especially the inner city—because they consider the situation virtually hopeless. They have forgotten that they serve a sovereign God whose business it is to overcome human obstacles.

Many Christians in the Third World have also given up on cities because they have been intimidated by the funds required for doing urban work, and also by the very complexity of urban life. In both areas Christians from the West can help them. William Smalley and others have helped us understand that funds flowing from one church to another do not necessarily destroy the indigenous character of the receiving church.[19] Some missions have pioneered in the area of financial assistance for urban churches. Other missionaries who know the urban scene in the West have counselled and assisted Christians for whom urbanization is a new and perplexing experience.

In emphasizing the contribution that missionaries can make I do not intend to take responsibility away from Christian brothers and sisters in the Third World. The church in the Third World has an urban responsibility and the strategy that this entire article has in view is actually a co-operative strategy in which indigenous church leaders and their missionary assistants work together in urban ministries.

Conclusion: Wise strategy will extend the church within the city wherever urbanization is taking place.

---

[16] Donald McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church* (Pasadena: William Carey, 1979), p.159.

[17] Roger Greenway, *Discipling the City* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), p.94.

[18] Timothy Monsma, *op. cit.*, pp.79, 80.

[19] William A. Smalley, "Cultural Implications of an Indigenous Church," *Readings in Missionary Anthropology* (Pasadena: William Carey, 1974).

Develop a Theology of Urban Pastoral Care

Presence in the city is not enough. One must be present with a timely message. We are mistaken if we think of church growth purely in terms of numerical growth. There must be spiritual (and structural) growth as well, if even the numerical growth is to be maintained. A timely message fosters spiritual growth. The call for contextualization, if the term is properly understood, is one we dare not ignore. Contextualization means "to put our message and ministry in context with our present world and people's life situation."[20] Good strategy includes contextualization.

In my book *An Urban Strategy for Africa*, I suggested three elements that will be found in any viable African urban theology.[21] These elements are actually appropriate to any urban theology for anywhere in the world. They are as follows:

1. Concern for structural change. The teaching and preaching ministry of the organized church must point out the need for changing structures that are evil. Slavery was abolished in the world partly because the church came to see the evils of slavery and preached against it. The church today must see the evil of racial or tribal discrimination as well as economic exploitation, and sensitize Christians to these evils. Once Christians are sensitized they will begin to act.

2. Concern for urban community. There are many anonymous people in the city in the sense that one does not know them by name even though he has dealings with them. Gregarious human beings must not be allowed to remain anonymous. They need fellowship groups where people know them and they know others. The local church is one such group. It is an appropriate fellowship group especially for those Christians who do battle with urban forces of evil and get hurt in the process. Within the fellowship there is healing for the wounded and there is fresh inspiration to go out and try again.

3. Concern for the laity. All of God's people are called to use their gifts in his service, especially in urban situations. In the city Christians often stand alone. They need to be tough but also flexible as they meet the temptations and challenges that come their way. Urban pastors must equip the saints for this diverse ministry in which they are involved. Only a well equipped laity will be able to man their positions on the front lines successfully.

Conclusion: Urban pastoral care involves much more than visiting the sick or holding the hands of the dying. It involves feeding God's people a steady diet of spiritual food filled with spiritual vitamins, minerals, and proteins. Only this will give them the strength they need to evangelize others, to extend God's church, and to promote his kingdom in the rapidly growing cities of the world.

——————————

Dr. Timothy Monsma, formerly a missionary in Nigeria, is Associate Professor of Missions and Anthropology at Reformed Bible College, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA.

---

[20] Russel A. Cervin, *Mission in Ferment* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1977).

[21] Timothy Monsma, *op. cit.*, pp.96–99.