

# EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 15 P. 1

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Volume 15 • Number 1 • January 1991

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## Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from  
publications worldwide for an international  
readership for the purpose of discerning the  
obedience of faith*



Published by  
THE PATERNOSTER PRESS

# The Lostness of Urban Squatters: Is There Any Hope?

Viv Grigg

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*This is a very distressing article. The author, a New Zealander who, with his Brazilian wife, has pioneered church planting among the urban poor in Manila and now in other cities in Asia, outlines the findings of his extensive research on the lostness of the urban poor. He estimates that by the year 2000 twenty million urban poor, mainly squatters, will live in Dhaka, Bangladesh. This is mind-boggling to say the least! He states further that in all cities of Asia (except in Korea) not more than 4% of the churches are located in squatter colonies and slums. The author suggests reasons why squatters, as distinct from slum dwellers, are potentially the most responsive people today. From this it is clear that reaching the urban squatter is no armchair task.*

What if the Muslim or Hindu worlds doubled every ten years? What if they were some of the most responsive peoples on the globe? How would this affect mission strategies?

Urban squatters are a bloc as large as these two worlds, doubling every decade. All indicators show them as responsive peoples. Logically, missions must adjust their strategies to make them their priority target.

The majority of migrants to the mega-cities will move into the *slums* (Bangkok), *squatter areas* (Manila), *shanty towns* (South Africa), *bustees* (India), *bidonvilles* (Morocco), *favelas* (Brazil), *casbahs* (Algeria), *ranchitos* (Venezuela), *Ciudades perdidas* (Mexico), *barriadas* or *pueblos jóvenes* (Peru). I will use the term *squatter areas* to refer to all these settlements.

These tend to be slums of hope whose occupants have come in search of employment, found some vacant land, and gradually become established, building their homes, finding work, and developing some communal relationships similar to the *barrios* or villages from which they have come. In the slums of hope, social forces and expectations create a high degree of receptivity to the gospel.

## OTHER URBAN POOR

Squatter areas need to be differentiated from the inner city slums—decaying tenements and houses that were once good middle and upper class residences. These may be described as slums of despair; they are home to those who have lost the will to try, and those who cannot cope. Yet here too are recent immigrants living near employment opportunities, and students in the hundreds of thousands, seeking the upward mobility of education. P. 52

In these slums of despair there is little social cohesion, or positive hope that facilitates a responsiveness to the gospel. As they are older poor areas of several generations of sin, they are not responsive areas and hence not as high a mission priority. It is more strategic to focus on the squatter areas.

## THE EXTENT OF THE SQUATTER AREAS

Estimates of the rates of growth of the squatter areas indicate that they are growing faster than the cities at annual rates of about 6–12 per cent. The squatter areas of Kuala Lumpur, for example, grew at an average annual rate of 9.7 per cent from 1974 to 1980. Much of this can be attributed to the growth rate of cities in general. Worldwide urban growth has been pegged at 2.76 per cent a year. Thirty to sixty per cent of this is due to migration from the rural areas. At that rate, city populations will double in twenty years. But the mission field among the squatters will double every ten years or so.

In the year 2000, 2,116 million or 33.6 per cent of the world will be in cities in less developed regions and 40 per cent (a conservative figure) will be squatters (846 million). This would indicate a world that is about 13.6 per cent squatters by the year 2000—a bloc nearly the size of Muslim or Hindu populations, doubling each decade—a distinct entity in their own right for evangelization.

When one includes both slum and squatter figures for these Third World mega-cities, in none of them is the percentage of poor less than 19 per cent. In many it is over 60 per cent.

Including the less reachable, decaying inner city slums, and street people in these cities, a reasonable estimate is that 50 per cent of the population of these cities in the year 2000 will be urban poor (1 billion), which is 16.8 per cent of the world's population.

The urban poor as an entity cannot, in contrast to the squatter communities, be generalized as a reachable bloc with cultural affinities. They do not identify themselves as communities with common characteristics or affinity for other types of urban poor. The urban poor as a larger class are defined in contrast to the people of the city, rather than as an entity in themselves. [p. 53](#)

## THE MOST RESPONSIVE INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL BLOC

Not only do the squatters share a common economic history and system that is nearly universal, but they also share universal religious characteristics, an animism that is far stronger than the prevailing 'high' religions. Cultural characteristics in the slums are as much universal as they are subculturally related to the prevalent cultures. We may define them as a cultural bloc with as much ease as we define Muslims or Hindus who span a broad range of ethnicity and culture. Animists in general are more reachable than other high religions.

Socially, each squatter community of reasonable size perceives itself as a distinct social entity, linked to the city, but with a life and society and subculture of its own. In any city, the squatters have coping strategies independent of middle class life, including middle class religious life to which they have little or no relationship. If you have ever been present when two squatter churches meet, you would understand the affinity evident between these people as a social class with similar occupations and patterns of residence.

Language in the squatter areas tends to draw migrants together as all learn to speak the *lingua franca* of the city. Yet almost all realize that they cannot read and write properly and are, unlike the middle class, uneducated. As a result, ethnic barriers lower but a strong class barrier towards the middle class emerges.

Such communities are more responsive than the closed rural village or the isolated middle class person. Poverty creates a positive responsiveness to the gospel, according to the apostle James. The changes migrants go through create a responsiveness.

Faced with universal responsiveness in the international subculture of poverty in these squatter areas, we must develop specific missions and plans for evangelization.

## WHERE ARE THE SQUATTER CHURCHES?

Where are the existing movements among the poor? The accompanying table summarizes recent research into church growth in the squatter areas and slums in various cities.

### ASIAN CITIES: MISSION TARGET

The target of world evangelism, the greatest unreached areas, remains in Asia. Here we find the slums of the cities relatively unreached by the love of God. Nowhere in Asia, with the exception of Korea, does the [P. 54](#)

#### The Squatter Churches (Millions)

| City                   | Pop 1985 | Slum/Squatter                | Slum/Squatter % of Pop | Number of Squatter Areas | Number of Churches In City | Number of Churches in Squatter Areas | % of Churches in Squatter Areas |
|------------------------|----------|------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <b>Asia</b>            |          |                              |                        |                          |                            |                                      |                                 |
| Calcutta, India        | 11.9     | 6 plus mill live one famy/rm | 57                     | 300 plus                 | 58                         | 0                                    | 0 2 house churches              |
|                        |          | 3.15 mil in bustee           | 33 in bustee           |                          |                            |                                      |                                 |
|                        |          | 48,000 plus on streets       |                        |                          |                            |                                      |                                 |
| Manila, Philippines    | 8.5      | 2.4-3.5                      | 415                    | 677                      | 29                         | 4.3                                  |                                 |
| Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia | 2.0      | .243                         | 24-35                  | 177                      | 100 plus                   | 1                                    | 1                               |
| Karachi, Pakistan      | 6.7      | 1.65                         | 33                     | 500 plus                 | n.a.                       | n.a                                  | n.a                             |
| Dhaka, Bangladesh      | 2.3      | .73                          | 32                     | 771                      | n.a.                       | 4 or less                            | n.a. <a href="#">p. 55</a>      |

|                      |       |                                   |          |          |      |                  |       |
|----------------------|-------|-----------------------------------|----------|----------|------|------------------|-------|
| Bangkok, Thailand    | 6.0   | 1.2                               | 19.6     | 1024     | 97   | 2                | 2     |
|                      |       | 600,000 Prostitutes               |          |          |      | 3 work w/prost.  |       |
|                      |       | 500,000 Addicts                   |          |          |      | 2 work w/addicts |       |
| <b>Latin America</b> |       |                                   |          |          |      |                  |       |
| Sao Paulo, Brazil    | 17.35 | 700,00 street children<br>800,000 | 7        | 5294     | 3500 | 66               |       |
|                      |       | 1.5 mil favelados                 | 7-17     |          |      |                  |       |
|                      |       | 3.0 mil corticos                  | 24% poor |          |      |                  |       |
| Rio de Janeiro       | 13.1  | 3.9                               | 30       | 500 plus | n.a. | n.a.             | n.a.  |
| Lima, Peru           | 5.5   | 2.7                               | 50-55    | 598      | 610  | 306-594          | 60-90 |
| Mexico               | 19.7  | 2.7                               | 15-25    | 500      | 1015 | 600-900          | 60-90 |

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church in the slums have more than four per cent of all the existing churches in the city. In each city, there are only a handful of slum churches. In no city is there a movement of poor people's churches.

The urban church of Asia is a middle class church. 'Urban mission' as a call unfortunately increases this bias. The target needs to be redefined urgently as 'urban *poor* mission'.

### Bangkok

The church in Thailand has faced much resistance to growth, but in the last ten years a growing openness has developed. The Church Growth Committee estimates that there are ninety-seven churches in Bangkok, about 25 per cent of which are relatively small and new (i.e., one church/60,000 population).

However, in the 19.6 per cent of the city that constitutes the 1,020 slums, there are only two churches and two house groups (1986). That is, only two per cent of the churches

are among the migrant poor, many in shacks of galvanized iron, others in overcrowded but well-built old-style Thai houses. Many of these migrants are from the more responsive North and Northeastern Thai ethnic groups. In 1986, we were able to initiate the first team of foreigners to live in these slums. For the 600,000 prostitutes, there are only two ministries and for the 500,000 drug addicts, only one drug centre.

### **Manila**

Manila is more evangelized than any other Asian city, because of the influence of a Catholic heritage. There are 677 churches. But at last count, there were only twenty-nine church-planting ventures among the 500 squatter areas that contain over 30 per cent of the 8.5 million population. There is still the need for someone to develop a churchplanting pattern that will generate an urban poor movement such as has occurred in Latin America.

### **Kuala Lumpur**

Kuala Lumpur, in Malaysia, is a dynamic city, growing rapidly and exploiting well the natural resources of its country by utilizing money pouring in from its Muslim brothers. The 24 per cent of its 2 million squatters include 52.5 per cent reachable Chinese and 14.9 per cent reachable Indians. It is one city where there has been a consistent and reasonably humane programme for uplifting these poor. A former rock p. 57 musician turned accountant-evangelist heard the cries of the poor and is building a church among them.

Chinese and Indian communities are open to the gospel. In general, the Chinese Malaysian church has been locked into an older style of church growth-oriented evangelicalism which does not understand issues of poverty, or a newer Pentecostalism that is dominated by a theology of affluence. Yet in the last ten years the church has become more open to ministry among the poor as a result of the charismatic renewal.

### **Dhaka**

The destitution of the poor in Dhaka is greater than in any city, even Calcutta, perhaps because Bangladesh is one of the most bereft nations on earth, despite its luxuriant agricultural resources. Houses are made of mud thatch, a few feet tall, and the people possess virtually nothing. This year the poor number 3 million. By the year 2000 that figure is projected to be 20 million. The majority of these poor will become squatters.

There are Hindu converts in the 771 *bustees*. But the majority of people are Muslim and have never heard or seen Jesus. The country is open to many forms of foreign development assistance and this gives open doors to respond to the cries of the poor.

### **Calcutta**

Sixty-six per cent of its 10 million people live one family per room. Two and one half million live in *bustees*, 500,000 in refugee areas, 48,000 (officially)-200,000 (generally accepted figure) live on the streets. There are other migrant squatter communities with homes of thatch and mud. There is no church, only two small house groups among these slums. Of the fifty-eight churches in this city of 10 million, many contain the poor, for 60 per cent of the city is underemployed. None is a church of the slums reaching out to the slums.

Jesus has sometimes been seen in these slums in the persons of a few varied saints, for there are many good Christian aid programmes. But he has not been heard for two generations and his body has not been formed: there are none to live among the poor and form it.

## LATIN AMERICAN CITIES

### Mission Source

In contrast with Asia, Latin America's cities are centres of amazing [p. 58](#) kingdom growth. The majority of the churches in Latin cities are among the poor. Why this difference? And what are the implications for missions?

### Lima, Peru

Once the capital of Spanish South America, today Lima is predominantly a city of 5.5 million migrant, Hispanicized Indian peoples. In 1940, 35 per cent of Peru was urban. By 1984, 65 per cent lived in urban areas. Thirty per cent of the total population live in Lima.

These waves of landless, homeless people have resulted in the sprouting of *pueblos jóvenes* (young towns), which now comprise 50 per cent of the city. Most spring up unplanned and without government assistance. After a period of time, facilities are extended to them by the government including water, roads, and electricity. There are 598 *pueblos jóvenes*, mostly on desert or mountains surrounding the city. There are also hundreds of thousands in over-crowded inner city tenements known as *tugurios*.

Of the 610 churches and 1.93 per cent evangelicals in the city, church leaders indicate that 90 per cent of the churches are in the *pueblos jóvenes*. There is, in Lima, a movement among the urban poor of a size much larger than in any Asian city. However, 598 *pueblos jóvenes* compared to 610 churches means that there are still many without churches.

The *tugurios*, the inner city tenements, are probably largely unreached as no church leader I talked with was aware of believers or churches in these areas.

### Mexico

The rich and poor among the 18 million people of Mexico City often live side by side on the same block. Other poor live in the *cuidades perdidas* (lost cities), where rundown and abandoned buildings become home. The School of Civil Engineers in 1984 counted 500 of these *cuidades perdidas* with 2.7 million people. There are also areas of squatters known as *paracaidistas* (parachutists) where 200 families suddenly descend overnight onto unused land, moving from the *cuidades perdidas*. The 1985 earthquake left 40,000 families relocated into what has become for them permanent-temporary housing.

Again, of Mexico City's 1,015 churches, the majority are among the poor. [p. 59](#)

### São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

São Paulo is a vibrant, sprawling metropolis that covers an area of 1,400 square miles, where 15 million people live and 106 languages are spoken. It has 115,000 industries, three major soccer teams, and thirty-four universities. Poverty is far less than in other world class cities: only 800,000 (1982) lived in the *favelas*—a mere 7 per cent. But this figure hides the reality of an estimated 500,000 Brazilians who are moving annually to São Paulo and the 3,000,000 (17 per cent) living in *corticós*—decaying, inner city buildings. Only 5 per cent of *favelados* in São Paulo have claim to their land. A mere 3 per cent of them earn minimum salaries.

Seven hours away, the city of Rio explodes into the skyscrapers dotting the beaches. In the midst of the wealth and the tourism lie some of the most beautiful *favelas* in the world. If one is going to be poor, it is smart to be poor in the most beautiful city in the world—and about 30 per cent of the population are.

There are more churches in São Paulo and Rio than in other cities of Latin America or Asia—5294 in São Paulo. There is a greater movement among the poor. Many *favelas* have

three or four churches. The majority of these are Pentecostal, particularly Assembly of God.

## **POOR PEOPLE'S CHURCHES**

Traditional churches are virtually nonexistent in any country among the urban poor. My research confirms this. Traditional churches that target the urban poor should plan for Pentecostal-style leadership, worship, and theology if they would succeed.

These churches have what poor people need. Simple patterns of noisy, emotionally healing worship, strong authoritarian leadership, and many legalistic rules. They are very dependent on the leading of the Spirit of God. They tend to lack in good Bible teaching, and reject book learning, partly because of the rapid growth which precludes extensive training of pastors and deacons. (This last factor is neither an essential nor healthy characteristic. Wesley modelled a way of developing theologically competent leadership among the poor). I have not found in any city a church formed among the poor that was not the result of healings, deliverance, and signs and wonders.

## **MOVEMENTS IN LATIN AMERICA; NOTHING IN ASIA**

There has been a dynamic of church-planting in Latin rural areas. **P. 60** Then, as migration has occurred, the pastors have moved with their people to the cities and the *favelas* and *pueblos jovenes*. Why has the same pattern in Asia not resulted in churches among the urban poor?

Perhaps the reason, assuming that mission over the last decades has predominantly been North American, is that the middle classes in Latin America have been identified with the Spanish and Portuguese, who have traditionally been closed to the gospel and opposed to North American influence. The poor, on the other hand, come from the more oppressed indigenous cultures with a suppressed opposition to the Spanish culture (though they are attracted by it). This is in contrast to the Asian scene where a positive attitude towards American culture by the upper and middle classes has meant a responsiveness to mission efforts.

## **NEXT PHASE: LATIN POOR MISSIONS TO ASIA**

It is possible that God will raise up some apostles from among the middle class church of Asia to bridge the gulf to their own squatter communities. Perhaps he will call some rich to live among the poor.

On the other hand, why not steal some of these trained Latin Americans—perhaps several hundred—to catalyze this? They have the faith. In fifteen months, Pastor Waldimar of Brazil, while developing the project *SERVOS Entre as Pobres* under his mission *KAIROS*, has recruited 170 potential missionaries for this task. Bankrupt Brazil does not have the finances for their transportation or support. By faith they wait on God who will overcome this barrier.

We would not expect significant church-planting among the Asian squatter areas from the affluent West; affluence makes it too hard to live among the poor. Mission to the poor tends to be defined as development. Traditional Western theology and structures do not meet the needs of the poor. I say this despite having set up two missions from Western nations to accomplish this goal and having an extensive background in community development.

Foreigners, WASP or Latino, are an important catalyst to the national Asian churches, but only a catalyst. We must model in such a way that indigenous works, indigenous leadership, and indigenous missions emerge. The aim is not missions. This is too small. Nor is it church growth. This is too limited. The aim is the discipling of the peoples—indigenous squatter discipling movements. These will not emerge from highly financed mission programmes. Missions that would catalyze these must be missions of workers who choose lifestyles of voluntary poverty among the poor. [p. 61](#)

God is calling for Latin missions with commitments to lifestyle of non-destitute and incarnational poverty (and for many, years of voluntary singleness) to catalyze indigenous movements of churches among the unreached squatters of Asia.

## HOW MUCH COULD GOD DO?

God will do what we ask. As you read, would you bow and pray for:

1. Two incarnational workers in every squatter area.
2. A church in every squatter area.
3. A movement in each city among the poor.
4. Transformation of slums and squatter areas in some cities.
5. Incarnational workers from among the poor who can affect economic and social structures and political options.
6. Mission leaders to make the squatters a priority.
7. A major thrust from Latin America to the Asian squatter areas.

Abraham prayed for a city.

God heard.

Nehemiah prayed for a city.

God gave.

Jonah spoke to a city.

What are we trusting God for?

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Viv Grigg is director of SERVANTS International Resources. [p. 62](#)

## Concepts of Salvation in Buddhism

Tissa Weerasingha

*This detailed and somewhat technical account of salvation in Buddhist thought reveals the gap between Christian and Buddhist language and concepts. While the Christian evangelist preaches salvation as rebirth the Buddhist seeks for deliverance from rebirth. The former assumes the reality of personhood in man and God, the latter rejects the self as impermanent and without identity. The idea of forgiveness of sins is meaningless to him. Most Buddhists have never heard the gospel because they have misheard it. The author of this article cautiously suggests some bridges in understanding of proclaiming the gospel to Buddhist seekers.*