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The Challenge of Urbanization in the Developing World A Case Study from Bombay

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Urbanization is a major contributing factor to the process of secularization and also to the post-secular forms of spirituality. This is as true of the cities of the emerging Third World as it is of the West. The article points to the complexity of the urban dwellers' self identity, the crisis of urban churches and para-church agencies. It challenges the whole church to the priority of urban mission.

Editor

God's redemptive concern for the concentrations of people in cities is clear throughout the Bible. We see the heart of God in Abraham's prayer for Sodom and Gomorrah ([Gen. 18](#)). We see it in the mission of Jonah to Nineveh and God's chiding of the prejudiced prophet, who would probably have seen a Sodom-type of holocaust. Jonah is told of the number of innocents as well as cattle in the city!

God's heart is seen in his call for his people to be a blessing (literally peace-*shalom*) to the city of Babylon and to be intercessors even while being a slave class people ([Jer. 29:7](#); compare [Psalm 137](#)). The purposes of God in the Messiah's ministry include the restoration of ruined cities ([Isa. 61:4](#)). In the New Testament, we see that the apostle Paul focused on the cities of the empire while fulfilling his mission to the Gentiles. It was a very effective strategy. Ephesus, for instance, became the centre for outreach to Asia through the natural webs of relationships that cities produce through commerce and interchange ([Acts 19:8-10](#)).

Though the Bible started with a garden, it ends in a city ([Rev. 21:1-4](#)). The city of God seems to be synonymous with the people of God. The mission of the Church today calls for the expansion of the city of peace (Jerusalem—God's people—God's kingdom) in the city of Baal or Babylon (Satan's kingdom). p. 360 What does that look like in India today?

I. DEMOGRAPHICS

India, like the rest of the developing world, is seeing a population explosion in the cities. The move from farm to factory has been repeated in industrializing societies in the twentieth century as it occurred in the Western world a century ago. The conditions of Charles Dickens's London can be compared with the overcrowding, the slums, the destitution, and the crisis with facilities, shelter, employment and health in Calcutta and Bombay, except that we enjoy better medicine and technology today, and live in a world made smaller (by the airplane and modern communications) than it was in the last century.

Whereas at Indian independence the urban population in India (that is, town and city) stood at 18 percent, in 1981 it had climbed up to 29 percent. It is predicted that in 2000 it will be between 40-45 percent. Our cities grow at a pace of up to 1500 new migrants (Bombay) every day; that amounts to 500,000 annually.

Migration accounts for more than 50 percent of the population growth in our major cities.

Needs are Opportunities

The city certainly demonstrates overcrowding, pollution, crime, and all the other problems that result from large conglomerations of people. But these also need to be seen as the great opportunity before the church in India. Here we may be involved in loving service and mission among the masses of the city.

The urban person in India today suffers from some of the same emotional maladies that urbanites face elsewhere in the world: loneliness, insignificance, and irrelevance in the complexity and enormity of the city. Along with this is the grim reality of overcrowded metropolises that rural migrants face, unless they are among the fortunate 50 percent who have a proper shelter over their heads.

II. UNDERSTANDING THE CITY'S PEOPLE

Who are the people that make up the Indian city? It is imperative that we see the sociology of the city before trying to make our plans for mission. 'The poor and the lost' provides an overall description, but we need to see how this mass of people can be understood by looking at them through different lenses.

Professions

The urban person can be distinguished from the rural person by being primarily a non-agricultural worker, but also in getting his identity from his occupation. He is not Mr. K. R. Reddy's son, but an engineer with Tata Electric, or a lathe operator in Hindustan Autos. There are, moreover, hundreds of professions and trades. Life revolves around one's profession. The time spent at work and in commuting adds up to fifteen hours daily.

The city can be seen as consisting of professional zones, e.g. the commercial district, the government offices, the industrial area, the transport zones of the railways, the airports, the bus stations. The people [p. 361](#) that the urban Christian comes across each day at his job site are a major mission field. The average pastor can multiply himself at the parishioners' work site if he sees himself as their trainer more than a Sunday preacher.

Ethno-linguistic Groupings

Every city is cosmopolitan to a far greater degree than a village. People not only come from all over the state and country, but also the world. Bombay has its Gujarati, Tamil, Marathi, Hindi, Bengali, Telegu, Kashmiri, Sindhi, and Punjabi worlds, as well as its Iranian, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and German ones. This makes the planting of language churches essential. The common language may be Hindi or English but works are needed in the native languages of the target groups. In Bombay we have churches in more than ten Indian languages, including Mizo and Nepali, as well as Korean and German.

The diplomatic community as well as international tourism and business involve the church in serious overseas mission. The growing world of refugees in our cities from Iran, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh call us to compassionate service. The world has come to us. This is God's mission today in our cities, where the peoples of the country and world have come to us. Many stories are told of how overseas students, international travellers and homeless refugees have found Christ in our cities.

Religion

Religion along with language strikes at a person's basic identity. In addition, caste in religion, as in the cases of Hinduism and Sikhism, creates a feeling of kinship. A way of seeing the city's peoples is by analyzing the ethno-linguistic religious caste groupings, e.g. Gujarati Patels or Gujarati Jains, or Tamil Agyangars, Malayali Nairs, Bhojpuri Yadavs, or Punjabi Kshetris. The Muslims have their subcultures too, such as the Gujarati Menons, Malayali Moplahs or Gujarati Bohras. The major religions of the world can all be found in the city. This calls us to look beyond our church walls to proclaim the gospel to the city's peoples.

Class

The city's industrial society and commerce produces class stratification. The rich and the poor are at opposite ends of the spectrum, with a squeezed-in middle class between them. Shacks are a reality in the city. Bombay has approximately four to five million living in them, as well as more than 100,000 in sidewalk/pavement shacks. The poor of the city as well as the rich need the good news. However, in a special way God calls the church in the city to care for the urban poor, for in them the nature of the kingdom of God is revealed. There needs to be churches for the slums that are holistic in their programme, involving themselves in the desperate plight of urban slum dwellers.

The Marginalized

We can also see a socially marginalized group at the very bottom. There are the prostitutes (150,000 in Bombay), **p. 362** the beggars, the lepers (700,000 begging in Bombay), the blind (estimate 150,000), destitute children, dying destitute (for which Mother Teresa has become famous), the mentally and physically handicapped, and the terminally ill of the city.

Age groups

Another way to look at our cities is by age. The average age is dropping as the number of births increase. The increased demand for educational programmes in Indian cities is only one indication that the percentage of children in the urban population is rising. It is therefore a time to expand children and youth ministries. Youth for Christ, Scripture Union and Union of Evangelical Students of India need to multiply their ministries many times over, and city churches need to make their children's and youth ministries more outreach-oriented. The children of the slums and the destitute children of our city streets beckon to us in a special way. What will their school-less and hungry lives produce without literacy, job skills and nutrition in the urban jungle?

III. UNDERSTANDING THE CHURCH IN URBAN INDIA

Churches should be the main resource pools for labourers in the urban harvest. We need to be quite broad-minded if we are not to close our minds to those who are in fact fellow labourers in the kingdom. We will find a lot of kindred spirits in the broad spectrum of the Catholic, Orthodox, historical Reformed churches of Episcopal traditions, and the older and newer churches in the free church tradition.

Unfortunately, a lot of church growth in cities is basically transfer growth. We need renewal in the older churches where a lot of nominal faith exists, but also in the newer ones, where even after the first generation the faith of the parents is not necessarily passed on. The wheat and tares are soon to be seen growing side by side.

What we need to see in the city is both the renewal and expansion of the whole body of Christ outwards to the unchurched. I recommend growing a whole network of churches in the city rather than just our own individual denomination. Few churches, I sense, want to grow by genuine evangelism to the unreached. How wonderful it would be to see churches growing by genuine conversions in the love and unity of Christ, as seen in [John 13:34-35](#) and [John 17:11, 21](#)!

Church plantings among the different people groups and languages can become a reality if churches will evangelize to the outer borders of their own language group in the city, while also sending cross-cultural workers to unreached groups. Urban church planters can come from within the city, so that the normal problems with new workers finding accommodation will not be a hindrance.

Parachurches in the city

The church versus the parachurch debate will continue for some time. It would be more profitable to see how we could join hands together for the city. Parachurch bodies have a mission function that the local [p. 363](#) church cannot always fulfil. They are specialized ministries, often service-centered in things like literature and media. Others focus on one people group, be they businessmen, the intelligentsia, students, youth, children, slum dwellers or hospitalized people. Those who are working for outreach to specific unreached ethno-linguistic religious groups in the city, however, are rare, as are those who have focused on professional groups such as rickshaw drivers, cabbies, airline personnel, factory workers, or hawkers.

Missions to tribals and villages often base their headquarters in the city but don't do any direct ministry there, apart from fundraising and administration. Considering that the village is moving to the city at such a rapid rate, we need to consider seriously assigning workers to the city, or having workers who reach out to the groups from the hinterland concentrate instead on reaching their own people in the city.

IV. EQUIPPING WORKERS

The problem of 'spectatoritis' in the city's churches is not a new phenomenon. God's chosen people are often God's frozen people! The pastor and a handful do most of the work of the congregation and very little participation is seen from the majority. Changing this in the city could dramatically see God's people (the laity) being unleashed. This will take training of pastors and laity alike. Groups like the Church Growth Institute in Madras, Christian education programmes, Bible colleges and seminaries, as well as city networks, need to underline the training of this silent majority in our churches.

V. STARTING A MINISTRY IN THE CITY

What are some of the essentials in beginning urban ministry? What are the first strategy steps?

Unity and networking

If there is one message I would like to preach over and over again, it is this: 'We are not alone in the city.' God has more people than we imagine. We need to avoid the Elijah syndrome of feeling we are the only ones left.

The more we can fellowship with the rest of the body of Christ in the city, the greater the reality of the message of Christ ([John 17:21](#)). Moreover, we can avoid duplication and see a genuine expansion of ministry. Examples of churches separated by language joining

together for youth conventions, consultations and joint evangelistic and spiritual life programmes are good signs on the horizon. Interdenominational prayer fellowships are starting in cities, building a climate for love and cooperation. Bombay, Calcutta, Ahmedabad, Pune, Delhi, Madras and Bangalore are some of the places where these exist.

Networking and coalition building up between similar ministries will multiply God's work. We need expansion rather than duplication.

Prayer for the city

The need to pray specifically for the city is not only a biblical precept but an existential necessity if we are to see the kingdom expanding there. The spiritual powers over the city, be **p. 364** they the strong man or the principalities and powers, need to be bound. Prayer is vital—along with the rest of our spiritual armour—to see Satan release his hold on the millions in the city. United prayer by urban coalitions specifically for the city and for one another is taking place. We need to see this increased. Prayer concerts for revival and evangelism are being held by pastors and for the whole urban church in Delhi, Bombay, and Ahmedabad where increased cooperation and a revival atmosphere are marked.

Prayer and fasting for our individual ministries is essential before launching out into new territory. Breaking into new people groups will meet stiff resistance.

Research

Gathering information about the people group you have targeted is essential. When this is not done, the result is a lot of hit-and-miss efforts. Where care is taken to do this, the blessing is very evident, as well as the saving of precious time and energy. Groups who specialize in research are the India Missions Association and the Church Growth Institute, Madras.

Training the team

This is essential if costly mistakes are to be avoided. All successful urban ministries are characterized by goal-oriented team meetings and careful planning and training.

God is calling for urban ministers today to discern the times and to be his messengers in the desperate population centres of India. May he find faithful laborers among us for the cities of this great country!

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The Gospel as Public Truth: A Critical Appreciation of the Theological Programme of Lesslie Newbigin

John Williams