Introduction to Urban Strategies

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Our opening word on topic of Urban Strategies at this Society's Annual Meeting must be to remind ourselves of Donald McGavran's burden for the urban centers of the world. He identified growing urban populations as "perhaps the most urgent task confronting the Church (McGavran 1970:295)." Admittedly, McGavran had the urban centers of the *majority* world in mind when he made that statement, because overseas mission was his primary focus at the time. He was yet to turn his attention to the *minority* world and the application of church growth insights to North America.

If he were here among us today, I am sure that he would be nodding vigorously in response to the urgency of the urban challenge that we face to plant new churches which are designed to be an effective missionary presence in the decaying inner-city, among the influential business communities, in the world of mass media, education and city government. In our introduction to the topic it becomes immediately evident that, we have to think beyond conventional church planting models in tackling such a heterogeneous, multi-layered, and mobile population. The purpose of this paper is simply to introduce the topic in general way, leaving later contributors to deal with different aspects from a more practical standpoint.

Defining the Term "Urban"

Before we can begin to consider urban strategies we have to define what we mean by "urban." The commonly held definition is that an urban society consists of a city with a population of at

least 10,000 persons. Such a definition is of more significance to demographers than to church growth practitioners. Within our US context our primary concern is with the cities with populations of over half-a-million. Yet, as Raymond Bakke observes, we must also recognize that the city represents more than a place, but processes which penetration into the rural areas and around the globe. Cities must be seen "in dynamic terms and defined by roles or functions. Thus we can speak of political, economic or cultural functions of cities (Conn 1997:81)." In the case of world class cities, they have more in common with each other, no matter where they are located around the globe, than with other cities within their own nation.

In the context of our discussions at this conference, we need to make some important distinctions in order to clarify our agenda. First, we need to distinguish between urban and suburban, the latter being applied to residential areas on the periphery of the city proper. Second, we must recognize that urban environments differ greatly and that each represents a distinct and diverse missionary challenge.

The term "urban" may be applied to a financial center consisting of concrete and glass multi-story corporate offices; or it may consist of a shopping and commercial area; or it may be a decaying inner city area with walls covered in graffiti, streets filled with trash, and many abandoned business and apartment buildings; or it may represent a previously neglected area which is now being re-developed. Confronted by such diversity how can one offer generic urban strategies.

I am reminded of a new apartment block I passed regularly, located in downtown LA and adjacent to the 110 Harbor Freeway, which had a large sign visible to motorists caught in rush-hour traffic, which announced, "If you lived here, you would be home by now!" By where would you worship!

White-Flight From the City

In attempt to address the is topic within the context of the membership of the American Society for Church Growth, we must admit that most of us represent churches and denominations which, for the most part, are either struggling to survive in the city or have largely abandoned the city to seek more promising ministry opportunities in the suburbs.

This migration began long before the racial composition of

the inner-city began to diversify. As I have indicated in a chapter dealing with urbanization in *Winning Them Back*, it was the evangelicals who created the first suburb, in Clapham, North London, which developed between 1735 and 1790, in order to escape the grime, squalor and crime which were the unintended by-products of the Industrial Revolution (Gibbs 1993:137).

Here in North America, urbanization got under way a century later, just prior to the Civil War. In 1841 Catherine Beecher, daughter of Lyman Beecher, a leading Evangelical preacher, wrote her *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, in which she espoused the home-based piety and nuclear family concepts of the Clapham Sect in England; values which could best be preserved by geographical separation from the city. The primary architect of American suburbia was Andrew Jackson Downing, who contracted Calvert Vaux in Paris in 1850 an English architect living in Paris who had been influenced by the suburban model developed by English evangelicals (Fishman 1978:124).

In much more recent times there has been a mass exodus from the city by old-line churches and a primary focus on church planting in the suburbs. The decade 1965-1975 might be termed the decade of retreat from the city. Harvie Conn, in the foreword to *God So Love the City*, writes,

> Increasingly withdrawn logistically from the city, frightened by the social upheaval of the decade and wary of what it perceived as a mainline church concentration on the wrong agenda, its traditional roots in pietism focused on evangelism. Its church planting attention turned heavily to the suburbs (Van Engen 1996:iii).

On the other hand, Catholicism and grass-roots Pentecostalism are far more at home in the city than is mainline Protestantism-whether old-line denominations or contemporary seeker-sensitive or new apostolic paradigm. It is significant that the city center and streets in a Protestant culture empty at night, while a city in a Catholic culture comes alive at night. Furthermore, given the ethnic make-up of most urban areas in North America, the people most qualified to address this topic are more likely to be African-American, Hispanic, Asian and people from the former Eastern bloc countries than Euro-Americans of Anglo-Saxon, Celtic and Nordic origins. How can the membership of the ASCG be expanded so that we can hear their voices, learn from

their experiences, and partner with them?

The Newer Cities and Expanding Suburbs

A further consideration in approaching this topic is the need to draw a distinction between the older cities of the North and South East from the new cities which have mushroomed since WW2 in the South West, such as Denver and Phoenix, which have not experienced "urban blight," and pose very different, but no less complex, challenges.

I believe that it is in such places that Church Growth insights have made the greatest contribution, in providing tools for church planters working in the new housing tracks and suburban developments, among middle-class, formerly churched people who in the upheaval of relocation may have dropped out of church if it were not for such entrepreneurial church planting initiatives.

In the case of existing churches, with the vision to reach out to a growing and potentially responsive population, and with capable leadership to seize the opportunities, church growth insights provided management, ministry and marketing insights which enabled them to take advantage of the situation.

It is in this climate that the "seeker sensitive" worship approach has made a significant contribution in providing a culturally relevant and welcoming climate for the returning baby-boomer, most of whom had been outside of the church for eight years or more. Churches effectively engaged in this ministry describe themselves as "the Church for the unchurched." A high percentage of returnees go to a church different from the tradition in which they were reared, most baby-boomers having become suspicious of traditional institutions and hierarchies. However, we must recognize that when the term "unchurched" is used, it refers primarily to the "formerly churched" rather then to the "never churched."

The so-called "seeker-sensitive" approach will remain significant for as long as there are "seekers" out their who are coming to the church for answers. However, I do not think that we can rely on a "seeker-sensitive" approach as our main strategy for urban evangelism in the coming decades. There is some evidence that disillusioned boomers are now looking elsewhere and that a disturbingly large percentage of Generation -Xers has given up on church. In their case the church must become the seeker fol-

lowing the example of Jesus, for it was the Son of Man who took the initiative and paid the price in order to come among us in order to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10).

As we face the challenge of reaching those who have become more distant from the church, perhaps an insight from Europe, regarding the "seeker-sensitive" approach would be helpful. Martin Robinson, Director of Mission and Theology at the Bible Society of England writes,

> Despite its innovative approach, the original 'Willow Creek' model still feels very much like a church to those from a European context. The imitators of Willow Creek in Europe have departed significantly from the detail of the model and are often attempting to create models for exploring faith which are much more avowedly secular in their feel. The heart of all these attempts is not slick marketing so much as the encouraging of the Christian community to build genuine friendships with unchurched, secular people in the natural social settings where everyday life is lived (1994:175).

I believe that there is an increasing need to distinguish between various categories of seeker. In addition "returning seekers", there are "disillusioned seekers," "despairing seekers," and "deluded" or "diverted seekers". Increasing numbers of "seekers" may not be looking in the direction of Christian churches which regard themselves as "seeker-sensitive." Rather they are looking for alternative forms of religious experience and expression.

As I reflect on the application of Donald McGavran's insights to the US situation I am concerned that we may have substituted marketing in place of mission and thereby seriously compromised the church growth paradigm. A market-driven approach can lead to superficial responses to deeper issues. It can lead to the promotion of a distorted form of the gospel designed to meet needs without challenging priorities and assumptions.

The Changing Face of Urban Migration

The strategies that worked in the city when the new migrants came mainly from rural and small town America or from Europe, as was the case in the first half of this century, will not work in the context of current urban migration. Today, the new

arrivals in the city are more likely to have come from other cities in the United States or from the great cities of Latin America and Asia. Increasingly they will either be at least one generation removed from the church, or be Roman Catholic rather than Protestant, or be nurtured in a non-Christian religion such as Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. They are also likely to be more mobile than their predecessors, so it is extremely difficult to build any sense of stable and committed community. Preaching in the city, even more than in the suburbs, is like preaching to a parade.

Robert Bellah has coined the term *"life-style enclaves"* to describe the networks or associations most common in urban life (Bellah 85:135). Within this culture of come-and-go-as-you-please, the church needs to find ways to establish and multiply exponentially communities of mutual commitment. If the concept of community is unrealistic given the diversity and dynamics of urban life, then we need to be drawing people together in threes to sixes as "companions," remembering that the origin of this word is "people who eat bread together."

Those WASP churches still surviving in the urban environment are likely to be well-established First Churches, who can still relay upon the loyalty of their congregation to commute from the suburbs for services, or small, elderly congregations which struggle week after week to keep the doors open, but continue a significant ministry to the elderly or financially hard-pressed who are trapped in a decaying neighborhood. In either case the tendency is for the church to become a cultural island, increasingly dependent on an external life-support system for its survival.

In his earlier work, *Bridges of God*, McGavran was highly critical of the "mission station" approach which isolated the missionary task force from the very people it was established to reach (1955:55-62). One wonders if many of our urban churches are so preoccupied in their struggle for survival and concern to maintain their traditions, that they have come to share a similar isolation. Insular urban churches need to be turned inside out in order to bring those outside in!

Questions to Be Addressed In Developing Urban Strategies

In the broadest terms the issues which must be faced before considering urban strategies include the following: Where urban

areas have been abandoned, how can churches be re-established when the price of real-estate has sky-rocketed? Should the strategy be one of serving as a resource to the churches which are already located there and doing commendable work under most difficult circumstances, rather than duplicating their efforts and contributing to the fragmentation of urban ministries? By what criteria can the most helpful support ministries by identified and prioritized? The needs are legion in many deprived urban areas: providing contextually-appropriate leadership training, refurbishing run-down facilities, building affordable housing (e.g. *Habitat for Humanity*), creating trade training schemes, establishing credit unions to make capital available to the local community, and promoting holistic care programs for the homeless.

And what strategies need to be developed to help believers survive in the inner city and to bear a credible and more consistent witness? How can the churches become a voice and advocate for the powerless among the officials of city hall, hardpressed police departments trying to curb gang violence and domestic conflicts? What support can be provided to school teachers and probation workers in the inner city? Where suburban development has drained so many resources form the city, eroding its tax base and community support organizations, will churches in prosperous suburbs be prepared to enter into a twoway partner with inner-city churches, being prepared to receive as well as to give as each minister to the poverty of the other? How can the churches that remain, African-American, Latino-American and Asian-American demonstrate reconciliation in areas where gang warfare is a fact of every day life, and which periodically erupts into widespread riots?

How can the voice of the prophet be heard in a pluralistic secular society? First it is the task of the intercessors, then of the poets, the bards and the clowns who gather a curious crowd and prepare the ground for the prophet to gain a hearing. Ours is the culture of the artist rather than that of the orator.

At the other end of the social spectrum, how is the church to work effectively in concrete, steel and Plexiglas jungles of corporate America? Suburban churches often seem remote form the issues which the occupants of these human filing-cabinets have to face in their professional lives. What does discipleship mean to a litigation attorney, to a financial planner, to an investment banker, to an insurance broker, to a television program producer,

to a doctor or nurse working in a premature baby unit or providing care for the elderly, to an architect, or to a city planner? How can the church be structures to provide the ministry and mission structures to help Christians address highly complex issues, build communities which will provide mutual encouragement and accountability and make the church accessible to unchurched, corporate America?

Why are the doors of so many city churches closed when the commuting crowd invades their neighborhood and are open when the working population has gone home at night or for the week-end and only the faithful flock drives into town for the Sunday Services? In city locations, what would a five, six or seven day a week church look like? How do our denominational distinctive and divisions fragment the witness of our church members in their working environment, when there may be few Christians in their law firm, insurance company, hospital and banking office, and all of them belong to a different denomination or theological tradition?

These are just some of the issues which I hope will become part of our agenda during the second half of this conference. Simply to list them makes us reel. Now you will appreciate why I suddenly become nervous about my title, and why my emphasis is on the "introduction" rather than on the "strategies." My tasks, are the easiest of all: at the beginning to raise a string of questions, and at the conclusion to be wise after the event!

The New Challenge of Postmodern, High-Tech Society

And even when we have pooled our knowledge, experience and insights, how can we avoid the danger of gearing ourselves for yesterday? Because the city itself will change in profound ways under the impact of post-modernism and the electronic communications highway as we enter a new millennium. I am a child of the city, growing up in a working-class are in post-WW2 Britain, but how the city has changed in the past forty-five years. My experience of the city in post-war industrial Britain has little relevance to the high-tech, multi-ethnic, media-dominated, web-based city of today.

As tele-commuting increases, with the prospect of many more people working out of their homes, what impact will this have on life-styles? Will we see a return to a more community-based society? Will the remote centralized, program-driven,

mega-church then be seen as an irrelevance? In future years will we regard them as we regard the Medieval Cathedrals of Europe today?

Among the disturbing characteristics of our age is that of discontinuous-change and the fact that tomorrow persists in arriving ahead of schedule. You seldom know what is coming at you around the next corner. We now live in a plan/do culture in which long term planning meanings trying to project five months in place of five years. So, at this annual meeting of the American Society of Church Growth, it will not be sufficient for us to dust-off and revisit old agendas, nor even to shock ourselves with the disquieting truths of our current urban reality. We will also need prophetic vision and the grace to walk more by faith and less by sight, knowing that it is God who is beckoning us into his future. Let us share the vision and commitment to urban mission of Eldin Villafane, when he writes:

> Ours is not a "sinking boat" theology of the city, an escapist view favored by some of our fundamentalist friends. Neither is it a "love boat" theology of the city, one favored by our liberal friends. I would like to think that ours is a "transport boat" theology of the city. We neither despair of our city, nor dare we romanticize its possibilities. We nevertheless move on, amid storms and trials carrying and seeking the shalom of the city (1995:44,45).

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