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## Church Planting in the Urban Setting: The Key to Reaching America

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**Church Planting in the Urban Setting:  
The Key to Reaching America**

**Elmer L. Towns**

One of the greatest perceived challenges facing America is their cities, their masses, their crime, their homeless, their politics, their corruption, their illegal aliens, their dwindling tax base, their crumbling streets, viaducts and sewer systems. But these are only generalizations. The greatest problem of the cities facing the church is the vast number who are lost and have never heard a Biblical presentation of the gospel. This problem is compounded by the problems found in their churches which are usually high steeple sanctuaries or a store front sectarian group that may or may not preach the gospel.

When the cities are designated, they include the inner city ghettos like Newark, New Jersey, the gold-coast high rise apartments of Chicago, the row houses of Baltimore and the ethnic neighborhoods such as Chinatown of Los Angeles, Koreantown of Greater San Francisco, and all the others ethnic groups that cluster in a metropolitan area around their language, values, traditions and sometimes particular dress. When cities are designated, it is a metropolitan area of people—as far as the eye can see.

Our example of evangelism in the cities is Jesus who did not hide in the rural area or gravitate to just the small towns. He went to the cities, including Jerusalem.

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*I. The Biblical Mandate of the Cities*

First, look at the description of Jesus' ministry. "And Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people" (Matthew 9:35).

"Now it came to pass, when Jesus finished commanding His twelve disciples, that He departed from there to teach and to preach in their cities" (Matthew 11:1).

The marching orders for Church Growth and Church Planting is the Great Commission, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). The strategy of Church Growth is found in the Matthew record, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19 NKJV). The geographical priority of the Great Commission was for Jesus' disciples to begin in a world-class city, i.e., Jerusalem. "But ye shall receive power after that the Holy Ghost has come upon you and ye shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Next, look at the example of the early church going to the cities. They went "everywhere preaching the Word. Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them" (Acts 8:4,5).

An early church was planted in the third largest city in the Roman world, i.e., Antioch, a cross-cultural church. "Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose about Stephen traveled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only. And some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, which, when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus" (Acts 11:19,20).

As the gospel spread, Paul and his helpers went to major metropolitan cities to plant churches, Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus.

Call it "trickle down evangelism," or "the influence of a great church in a great city," but evangelism in the New Testament was aimed at the largest number of people in the largest cities and the gospel flowed from these cities to out-lying towns and rural areas.

Ephesus was a major city where Paul planted an influential church. Note the influence on the surrounding small towns. “And this (ministry in Ephesus) continued by the space of two years, so that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the Word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10).

The ultimate aim of Paul was to preach in Rome—the center of civilization. “Without ceasing, I make mention of you (believers in Rome) always in my prayers; . . . that I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come to you” (Romans 1:9,10). Rome was the most influential city in the known world. From Rome the gospel could influence the world. When Paul wrote to the Philippians the gospel had already influenced the palace guards and from them to the world. “In the palace and in all other places” (Philippians 1:13).

Therefore, we must develop a modern day strategy: (1) to not be afraid of the cities. (2) to see the cities multitude—God loves people. (3) to develop a Biblical workable strategy to reach the cities. (4) to realize by reaching the cities we can fulfill the Great Commission to reach the world.

## *II. The Challenge of the Cities<sup>1</sup>*

Why are the cities so important? Because what happens in the cities of America, influences suburbia and the rural areas. While this section focuses on the United States, it has ramifications on the rest of the world. Our cities have the following influences: (1) money decisions, (2) political decisions, (3) communication decisions, (4) entertainment decisions, (5) and social decisions. These decisions influence suburbia and small-town America.

We know that the cities are big, influential, and have great potential, but do we know: (1) who is in the cities? (2) the power of the cities? But more importantly, do we know, (3) the problem of the cities?

Take Greater Los Angeles for an example with four and a half million Hispanics, this is the second largest Hispanic city in the world.

Greater Los Angeles is the second largest Chinese city

outside of Asia, the second largest Japanese city outside of Japan, the largest Korean city outside of Korea, the largest Vietnamese city outside of Vietnam, and the largest Philippine city outside of the Philippines.

Greater Los Angeles has a population greater than any state in the Union except California, Texas, and New York. More people live in Los Angeles than in my home state of Virginia.

One hundred years ago, 82 percent of all immigrants to America were from Europe. Today three fourths are from Asia and Latin America; and most settled in the city.

More ethnic people live in American cities than the white city dwellers. Over 81 percent of African Americans live in the city, 88 percent of Hispanic (Spanish Americans) live in the city, 90 percent of Orientals (Asian Americans) live in the city, and 48 percent of Native Americans live in the city, (we mistakenly think of them living on the Reservation). However, only 25 percent of White Americans live in the city and they are usually poor, aged, or of foreign origin.

Already one half of the world's population lives in an urban center (a city of 50,000 people or more). However, in a nation that is developed like America, this percent is much higher. Over 80 percent of our nation lives in our metropolitan areas.

Look at some observations about church work in the cities. Most of our evangelical churches send missionaries from suburban churches to start suburban churches or minister in rural areas in America or outside of America. Very little missionary work is sent to the American cities. What verse could best be used to challenge us to missionary work in American cities? "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (Romans 5:20).

Our cities have become the melting pots for people from nearly every country in the world. Our refugees go there, and these are the people who do not know Christ, or they are from other religions, and they are our greatest challenge.

While the church feels threatened by the emerging pluralism from other religions, this is a great opportunity to preach Christ and to plant churches.

The cities will continue to grow. By the year 2000 our cities

will grow another 12 percent, while our rural areas will continue to decline and suburbia will maintain its population.

There are 130 million United State citizens attending 343,000 churches. Seventy million are Protestant, attending 300,000 churches. An average of 49.7 million Catholics are attending 23,500 churches. Six million are Jews attending 5,000 synagogues. Over 2.8 million Mormons attending 6,900 churches. One million are Orthodox attending 1,600 churches, and 500,000 are Jehovah Witnesses attending 6,000 Jehovah Witnesses Halls.

George Gallup the pollster indicates 15 percent of all Americans are Evangelical and that 86 percent of the Evangelicals attend church regularly. Therefore the people we claim are probably converted, (i.e., evangelicals) represent 35 million, or 15 percent of our population. Most of the evangelical churches are in suburbia and the rural areas, not in the city.

For the observation, 42 million Americans belong to churches of the National Council of Churches. 14 million are Southern Baptist, 3 million belong to the National Association of Evangelicals, 2.5 million in the American Council of Christian Churches, 120,000 Independent Fundamental Council of Churches, and 9.4 million belong to unaffiliated churches.

Question: the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* list 490,000 clergy in the United States, 271,000 are pastoring our 343,000 churches. This means 62,000 Protestant churches are either without a pastor or have a part-time pastor. Do we need these churches filled with pastors before beginning more new churches?

Question: if every American attended church, the average church would have 1,000 members, but yet the average is less than 75. Can we reach America without planting new churches?

Question: Edward Dayton reports in the publication *Unreached Peoples* that churches in America and the United States are losing 2,765,000 members per year. Will new churches with new vitality help reverse the decline in church membership?

The cities are the greatest mission field in America because there are so many people there, representing so many needs, while at the same time, it is difficult to reach them because they

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come from so many backgrounds and there are so few churches doing far too little.

Other challenges facing the church: in America there are over 45 unchurched people groups (Ethnic groups having no churches to evangelize them). Most of the individuals in these groups are unevangelized.

In addition to this is the following challenge to America:

- 35 million Handicapped
- 10 million Alcoholics
- 2.4 million Hindus
- 6 million Jews
- 3 million Muslims
- 4 million Americans are prison inmates
- 1.4 million Native Americans or Indians

Hispanic Americans are the second largest ethnic minority in America, and the National Spanish Television Network is connected to 3.1 million Spanish speaking households, yet less than 15 percent of them are Protestant and the Central American Missions claim only three to five percent are Evangelicals.

There are six million temporary residents in America who are neither immigrants or tourists, many are students or workers with green cards. Most of these people live in urban America.

When we come to the bottom line, 75 percent of Americans who live in the city are unevangelized and how do we label them?

1) Undesirable, because they are street people, poor, illiterate, or foreign.

2) Unwanted, because they are different than people in the traditional white church.

3) Unseen, because they are not what we see in our Christian literature, i.e., they are not white Americans.

The city is a paradox. First, because it is the center of economic wealth, commercialism, and money; yet the city is the center of poverty and want. You see the homeless in front of a large prosperous business sleeping over the warm air grate in the wintertime.

The city is also a paradox because it stands for law, order, and civilization, yet in the city you see the greatest forms of evil,

filth, and degregation. It is in the city where you find X-rated films, the center of prostitution, and the greatest centers of evil.

The third paradox is the church. In the city you find the greatest steeples, some of the greatest names among churches, and yet you find less evangelism, smaller congregations, less vitality for Jesus Christ and almost no soul-winning where the greatest number of people are located.

### *III. Toward a Strategy of Urban Church Planting*

Section II, has concluded that the greatest task facing the American church may be evangelizing the cities of America. While the gospel covers America by radio, television, (various area of media) and most Americans have distant memories of the gospel; at the same time there are massive pockets of people groups, mostly living in the cities who have not properly heard and understood the gospel. What shall be our strategy to reach and preach to them?

#### *Church Planting Focus<sup>2</sup>*

1. God has commanded us to make disciples among every ethnic group or "people movement" world-wide, (Matthew 28:19; Acts 1:8).
2. God intends to fulfill His purpose of discipling nations by local congregations, i.e., churches, not just with individuals. (I Cor. 12:14; Ephesians 4:11–16).
3. Acquiring many individual converts to Christ does not naturally result in forming a church to carry on the process.
4. God desires that all people should have the opportunity to worship and serve Him within a church that reflects their unique cultural and social environment.
5. A major barrier to reaching unchurched people for Christ is that they perceive Christianity and the "church" as "foreign" to their culture or social environment.
6. Therefore, we must establish indigenous churches as the Biblical function and goal of New Testament evangelism.

We have also concluded in Section II The Challenge of the Cities that: 1) the cities are influential, 2) the cities have great



numbers that are unevangelized, 3) the cities are multi-cultural and multi-ethnic, 4) the cities are dynamic, changing, and elusive, 5) the church is not reaching the cities the way we are doing evangelism, as it once did. Therefore, the American church must adapt a new strategy to guide church planting in the cities.

**New Principles For Church Planting In America.**

1. Recognize that traditional American church methods that are geared to American suburbia and rural areas will not generally work in Urban America.
2. View the United States as a secular mission field and develop an urban strategy that is local to national, not the reverse.
3. Apply successful foreign Church Growth concepts to urban United States.
4. Develop a church planting strategy that encourages creativity in methodology, yet Biblical in principle.
5. Give general permission to deliver the gospel (unchanging principles) in innovative fashion (new methods) that is effective in each localized urban setting.

I mailed a survey to 84 evangelical denominations to survey their endeavors at urban church planting, primarily in the United States. I received responses from the mailing, along with sample written copies of their programs, plans and purposes. From a study of these denominational papers, grew a general perception about the future of urban church planting in the United States. The Missouri Lutheran Church best expressed this generalization.

Urban ministry is more like effective missionary activity in a foreign mission field. Urban ministry is less like congregation—based structural thinking used in traditional congregations located in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, based on the above assumptions, I surveyed the latest thinking in the publication dealing with urban church planting in the United States. The Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod again supplied me with the following summary:

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**Assumptions About Older Churches  
Planting New Works**

1. Most denominations have not had much success at activating existing congregations to reach out to their surrounding communities.
2. Most denominational growth occurs in new ministries.
3. New ministries do not have to live down harmful reputations, but can approach individuals and community openly.
4. Historically, new churches have required higher initial capital expenses.
5. However, current church planting methods of establishing new congregations have significantly lowered the initial capital expense.
6. Denominational growth comes from new ministries (congregations) not the expansion of present congregations.<sup>4</sup>

I believe the above six assumptions suggest a practical basis for approaching urban church planting for the immediate future.

The Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, indicates there is no such thing as a “magic pill” in urban ministry. By this they mean there is no one successful way to plant new churches, nor one successful technique to establish successful urban ministries. As an illustration, a day care ministry may work well to begin a church in one community, but not another. Bible studies or cell groups will work to plant a church in some areas, but not others. As a matter of fact, Klaas said, “We believe this type of thinking about urban ministry is dangerous.”<sup>5</sup>

The following suggestions are given for urban church planting. These suggestions come out of Church Growth orientation and can guide in the establishment of a new congregation.

**Suggestions For Approaching A Community**

1. Start by achieving an understanding of the community and the ethnicity of the locations where the new church will be planted.
2. Build rapport with the specific ethnic community of your ministry location.
3. Find people (evangelism) within the community that will identify with your ministry approach.
4. Network with others who have employed a similar strategy in the area.<sup>6</sup>

The church that will be planted in the city will not always be like the churches in American suburbia or rural settings. They will not always own property, parking lots and parsonages. They may not have Sunday School rooms, gyms, or steeples. They may not be organized by boards, committees, or flow charts. They may not be incorporated by the state, nor will they have an extensive budget, bank account, or bills. The church of the cities will look like the churches of the New Testament. They will be simple, functional, traditionless, yet effective in helping its members and efficient in reaching lost people with the gospel. The church of the city will probably have:

#### **Characteristics of City Churches**

1. Multiple services.
2. Multiple locations
3. Multiple ministers
4. Multiple ministries
5. Bound by fellowship love and ministry, rather than standards, doctrinal agreement and denominational recognition.
6. Independent of association restrictions, but dependent in associated fellowship with others of like-faith and like-practices.

The city churches will take many forms and characteristics. There will be store-front churches that may be revivalistic, service-

oriented, doctrinal-based, militaristic, pietistic or will have characteristics of a “withdrawing sect,” other churches will take on the characteristics of metropolitan church (Walrath type 3) that draws people from all areas of the city. Other churches<sup>7</sup> will be the old down-town church that is called Old Main, or the First Church, still other churches will be the Outer-Urban Church, the City Suburban Church. Some churches will appear to be cells, Bible study groups, or other expressions of small groups. Whatever the appearance, they will be known by their internal ministry, rather than by their outer characteristics.

*Conclusion:*

The challenge of the cities is greater than presently realized by most churches. We not only are failing to reach and evangelize the cities, but the church does not know it is failing. Perhaps we would become discouraged if we really understood the enormous task before us. Even then, we must realize that; 1) the task is so great only God can do it. 2) we are so far behind we can not quit what we are presently doing, even though small, because we must attempt to obey Jesus’ last command, i.e., the Great Commission.

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NOTES

1. Statistic in section II The Challenge of the Cities supplied by *The Home Mission Board*, The Southern Baptist Convention, Atlanta, Georgia, in the publication *Mission USA*, 1996.

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2. Harvie M. Conn, editor, *Planting and Growing Urban Churches*. These fundamentals adopted from Caleb Project Research Expeditions, by John Holzman, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997, p.53,54.

3. Alan C. Klaas, *Mission in Urban Area: Report of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, Urban Ministry Task Force*, (St. Louis, Missouri, Concordia Publishing House), 1995, p.2.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 31. The outline from Klaas is adopted for this paper.

5. *Ibid.*, p.41.

6. *Ibid.*, p.45.

7. "Community Church Paradigms," *A Practical Encyclopedia of Evangelism and Church Growth*, by Elmer Towns (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1996) p. 112.