THE STRATEGIC NATURE OF URBAN MINISTRY

Alan McMahan

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Abstract

The explosive growth of cities around the world provides an unprecedented and strategic opportunity for the advancement of the gospel and the expansion of the church. Ten over-lapping realities found in urban contexts are explored in this article to show how the world is dramatically changing the context in which most people live. The enormous advantages offered by urban ministry are then examined to show how the church can extend its reach, identify and reach receptive people and influence the culture of a region or a nation.

Many evangelicals in the last half century have, for the most part, viewed the city with suspicion, distrust, and criticism. Vilified as a cesspool of violence, moral decay, and poverty, the urban center was largely vacated by post-World War II white evangelicals as they fled on the newly constructed super highways to the relative comfort, security, and homogeneity of the suburbs. In time, theology complied with this shift, and the white, evangelical worldview either erected justifications for demonizing urban living[1] or

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[1] See Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmann's Publishing Co., 1970).

simply neglected the city altogether. Seminaries and Bible colleges, looking for less expensive land and more compatible audiences, often followed. Missionaries and pastors were recruited from suburban churches and sent to rural and suburban contexts abroad to work with receptive peoples and newly established churches.

As a result of these trends, the evangelical community has lost a strategic advantage in the worldwide expansion of the church and the mission it carries. This paper will reflect on the strategic nature of urban ministry for the twenty-first century and issue a call for action. With limited resources and yet an ever-expanding challenge, the evangelical church will do well to consider the convergence of multiple opportunities that make urban ministry a point of high leverage in the task of global evangelization. In the pages that follow, ten strategic realities and the corresponding opportunities for mission will be explored.

Though most of us may quickly dismiss the negative stereotype of the city as described above, perhaps we have thought less about how important the city may offer strategic leverage in the years to come. The following ten realities may help us in that regard.

Reality #1: Cities Are Where the People Are

The year of 2008 marked a turning point in world history—for the first time in all of time, more than 50 percent of the world's population lived in cities. The forces that propelled the world's population to achieve this milestone will continue to drive it toward even faster rates of urbanization in the years to come. Between 2007 and 2050, the world's population is expected to increase by 2.5 billion to a total 9.2 billion.[2] The world's urban population, mostly in the undeveloped world, will absorb all of this growth. The global urban population is expected to double in size by 2050, adding 3.1 billion to reach a total of 6.4 billion, thus accounting for 70 percent of the total number of people on earth.[3]

Clearly, the rapidly expanding mission fields of the future will be centered in urban contexts in the developing world. That is where the people will be en masse. That is where the needs and opportunities will be the greatest. A strategic point of mission investment needs to be focused on these large population groups for whom Christ died. Mission agencies that previously achieved success in evangelizing the remote corners of the earth will need to retool to reach the majority of the people who now live in the crossroads.

Reality #2: High Density Creates Opportunity

As urbanization continues at an unprecedented rate, cities are not only getting larger, but they are also becoming denser. This rising population den-

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[2] United Nations, "World Urbanization Prospects," 2007 Revision, (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, March 10, 2010), 1.

[3] Ibid., 1–2.

sity is inevitable as more and more people compete for scarce resources, and entrepreneurs see the opportunity to make more money with high-occupancy buildings. While in 1925 there was only one city whose population exceeded more than 10 million,[4] in 2009 there were twenty-five cities with populations higher than that.[5] By the middle of the twenty-first century, the world's total urban population will be the size of the entire world's population in 2004.[6]

With urban compression, several changes take place in the social patterns of the city. Louis Wirth in the 1930s[7] argued that large numbers of people collecting into the same space increases the likelihood that one will encounter a larger number of people of diverse backgrounds. The dissimilarity between these masses of people is displayed as higher variation in racial, cultural, economic, and class types.

Jonathan Freedman in 1975[8] put forth a density-intensity hypothesis arguing that urban compression has the effect of amplifying a person's normal behavioral responses to a particular situation. Negatively, a person's dysfunctions may become more intense in an urban context while positively, a person's good qualities may be drawn out more intensely, too. Therefore, lonely people become lonelier, and creative people become more creative, etc.

While Wirth's understanding of urban compression emphasized the negative effects of the city and the power of dissimilarity to divide people and place them in conflict with each other, Claude Fischer[9] recognized that high-density environments often gives rise to a multitude of new groups who emphasize similarity. The critical mass created by urban compression generates groups that may be less based on ethnicity or region of origin and more centered on special interests and personal preferences. Where else could one find a group interested in eighteenth century Slovakian literature or a society for poisonous snake lovers?[10] Given enough people, even the most idiosyncratic of virtues will find a home and a group of people to support it.

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[4] Tertius Chandler, *Four Thousand Years of Urban Growth: An Historical Census* (St. David's University Press, 1987).

[5] Thomas Brinkhoff, "The Principal Agglomerations of the World," http://www.city-population.de, October 1, 2005.

[6] United Nations, "World Urbanization Prospects," 2007 Revision, (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, March 10, 2010), 3.

[7] See Louis Wirth, "Urbanism as a Way of Life," 1938.

[8] Jonathan Freedman, *Crowding and Behaviour* (San Francisco: W. H. Freedman and Company, 1975).

[9] Claude Fischer, *The Urban Experience*. Second Edition. (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1984).

[10] For a more complete description see: Edward Krupat, *People in Cities* (New York: Cambridge University Press), 55.

The city, therefore, introduces the individual to a host of people unlike us and other groups of people very much like us. The close and frequent encounter with people of other backgrounds and beliefs may challenge the individual to retreat to the safety of the cultural ghetto or seek an affiliation with those with whom they share a common interest. This renegotiation of the social contract can lead to new freedoms and receptivity as mentioned below.

Urban compression then creates the opportunity to realign affiliations and relationships while increasing the exchange of ideas. These two factors and many others make high-density environments a strategic point of leverage for doing missions where the good news can be proclaimed with greater efficiency and effectiveness in a rapidly shifting world.

Reality #3: The City Brings Freedom

As described above, the increasing heterogeneity one encounters in a large urban context tends to break down the cohesion of the social unit and erodes any consensus around a moral code. Family and village values no longer control behavior, and gossip (the village version of enforcement) no longer has the power to curb deviance from the norms. Human interaction becomes segmented so that one only knows another in a single context (i.e. just as with the supermarket clerk that one never sees anywhere else) rather than as "whole persons" where one's life intersects with another in multiple roles and contexts. High density insures that these people frequently rub shoulders with each other and adopt patterns of behavior that allow them to cope with "a world of strangers."[11]

While negatively these realities can lead to loneliness, exploitation, and despair, positively, they can loosen the ties (and the bondage) to traditional ways of thinking and increase the likelihood that these individuals will be freer to consider new ideas. Instead of the pressure to conform to traditionalism, they are now free to consider new ideas and new ways of doing things.

Though this may pose a threat to undermine one's faith commitment, more often than not, the new freedom that people experience becomes an opportunity of engagement if the gospel can be presented in terms that make sense and meet needs.

Reality #4: Cities Are Filled with Receptive People

Often it is assumed that the city is a place that is hardened to the gospel and resistant to outside influences. This association may be because urbanites are often perceived to be disinterested in or even rude to strangers. In my own ministry experiences in New York and other large cities, I have found this tough exterior to be merely a veneer of disinterest which functions as a protective covering to help shield out the overstimulation typical of the city

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[11] Krupat, 50–63.

or to protect against those who would seek to take advantage of others. In most encounters, however, this tough exterior quickly gives way to friendly engagement and a willingness to help if one can establish rapport.

However, being friendly is still quite different than being open to the gospel. Despite our expectations of the urban environment, is it true that urbanization can induce receptivity?

It has long been recognized that receptivity among people fluctuates widely given a host of environmental and internal conditions. Indeed, the parable of the sower[12] indicates that Jesus himself recognized this fact and instructed his disciples accordingly. Donald McGavran in his magnum opus, *Understanding Church Growth*, identified a number of factors as early as 1970 that influence the receptivity of people to the gospel and other new ways of thinking. McGavran noticed that new settlements, returning travelers, conquest, nationalism, freedom from control, and acculturation were all associated with an increased level of receptivity.[13] George Hunter expanded on this list to identify thirteen indicators of receptivity that are significant in changing the receptivity of a population toward the gospel.[14] Several of these factors are especially significant to the urban context. Population mobility, major culture change, and the opportunity to join new groups or make new affiliations that are not "controlled" by traditional culture all work together to create an open attitude toward new things. Likewise, churches that can meet the felt needs of newcomers (and old timers), or who minister to people who are experiencing personal dissatisfaction with themselves or their new context, or who are going through major life transitions that urbanization brings will often discover receptive people.

Unfortunately, receptivity theory also suggests that people do not remain open or receptive forever. While some people (especially newcomers) may become receptive upon moving to the city, others may become more resistant. Overstimulation from so many competing truth claims can cause some to become more aggressive in shutting out unwanted influences. In these cases, the city produces the opposite effect.

Nevertheless, it is significant that early Christianity grew rapidly in the cities. Paul concentrated his church planting efforts there as he found spiritually hungry people. In the same manner, modern church planting efforts are finding increasing success in meeting the unique needs of urbanites as they look for new meaning and a spiritual home that may not be typical of their roots.

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[12] Matthew 13:1–23; Mark 4:1–20; and Luke 8:1–15.

[13] Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmann's Publishing Co., 1970), 216–227.

[14] George G. Hunter III, *To Spread the Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 76–89.

Reality #5: The Nations Are Moving to the City

Today there are approximately 200 million international migrants, according to the Population Division of the United Nations.[15] This figure is about as large as the population of Brazil, and it is twice as large as it was in 1980. If the migrant population continues to increase at the rate it has in the last five years, by the year 2050, the number of international migrants will be as high as 405 million.[16] Approximately half of these migrants are women, many of whom are traveling independently as heads of households, representing a new trend in migration patterns. Furthermore, the ethnic and cultural diversity of these migrants is higher than ever. As a general pattern, the flow of immigration is from the southern hemisphere to the northern hemisphere and from rural areas to the city.

The United States was the leading migration destination in 2005 with a total of 38 million international migrants (about 20 percent of the worldwide total), followed by Russia with 12 million, and Germany with 10 million.[17] From 1995 to 2000, a full 75 percent of the population growth in the U.S. came from migration.[18] The disproportionate migration to Western nations is seen in the fact that one out of three international migrants live in Western Europe, and one out of four live in northern America.[19]

Upon their arrival in the destination country, the vast majority of migrants first live in the city. For many, this will be their home, where they will put down their roots and raise their families. For others, cities represent a place to get their feet under them and adapt to their new world before they move on to a less densely populated area where others from their nationality await. Thus, cities represent "ports of entry" for newcomers. As a point of comparison, Miami represented the city with the most foreign born of any city in North America with 59 percent, followed by Toronto at 50 percent,[20] and New York at 36 percent.[21] New York City is estimated to be home to 170 nationalities speaking approximately 800 languages,[22] while Los Ange-

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[15] "Migration in an Interconnected World: New Directions for Action." Report of the Global Commission on International Migration (Switzerland: SRO-Kundig, 2005), 1.

[16] "World Migration Report 2010, The Future of Migration: Building Capacities for Change," IOM International Organization for Migration (Geneva, Switzerland, 2010), 3.

[17] "International Migration Report 2006: A Global Assessment," United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, xv.

[18] "Migration in an Interconnected World," 85.

[19] "International Migration Report 2006," 1.

[20] United Nations Development Program, 2004.

[21] "The Newest New Yorkers, 2000," New York City Department of City Planning, Population Division (accessed March 10, 2011), 5.

[22] Sam Roberts, "Listening to (and Saving) the World's Languages," *The New York Times* (accessed April 29, 2010).

les is estimated to be home to 140 nationalities, speaking 224 different languages.[23]

In terms of mission strategy, these population trends are staggering. Clearly, urban contexts offer a way to serve multiple ethnicities and people groups with a level of efficiency not possible anywhere else. From a single location, representatives from the nations of the earth can be engaged with the good news, and given the receptivity factors already discussed, they are likely to be more open to hearing it. Indeed, some Christian workers are finding a higher level of receptivity in ministering to international migrants in U.S. cities than they would find in the originating cultures of these people. For example, Chris Clayman's efforts in evangelizing the Fulani of West Africa were as successful in New York City as they were when he was a missionary in West Africa.[24]

Urban compression combined with geographical relocation and the need for immigrants to build new affiliations and relationships converge to create receptivity to new ideas that is uncommon in many other contexts. While the diversity and pluralism of the city can be difficult for the newcomer to navigate, it nevertheless breaks down traditional ways of thinking and provides opportunity for the gospel witness.

In order to respond to this opportunity, churches, mission agencies, and NGOs will need to retool their efforts in order to make them function well in the relatively unfamiliar multicultural territory of the city. A clear understanding of how to grow both monocultural and multicultural churches will be necessary, recognizing that both types of churches are needed to effectively reach different kinds of people. Monocultural churches offer the fewest number of cultural barriers for newcomers to overcome and therefore may be more tolerated by first generation immigrants. Multicultural churches, on the other hand, had better display the ways the gospel breaks down cultural barriers to create a new oneness in Christ and may provide a more attractive environment for second generation, bicultural young people.

Reality #6: The City Is Going to the World

Typically, it is believed that migration is a one-way road as people move from less developed, less safe, and less prosperous areas to arrive in "a land of opportunity" where they can improve their standard of living, the prospects for their children, and their future. Especially given the difficulty of legal migration and the costs and inherent dangers of illegal crossings (i.e. exploitation by unscrupulous smugglers, arrest by law enforcement agents, or physical dangers), it is commonly assumed that migration is a one-time act. The reality is much different.

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[23] "City basics." Lacity.org. April 12, 2005 (accessed April 13, 2010).

[24] Personal correspondence, March 17, 2011.

Migrants often cross back and forth across national boundaries several times in their lifetime. So common is the pattern that some sociologists prefer to use the term "human mobility" as opposed to "migration," which implies a more static movement in one direction. Other terms include "repatriation" and "circular migration" to describe the phenomenon of returning to the homeland on multiple trips. Of course, some migrants cross borders for seasonal work, international trade (legal and illegal), health care reasons, or just to keep up social relationships with friends and family. In these cases, they may not intend to stay long term in the destination country but only as it meets a temporary need.

Even for those who do intend to stay long term in the destination country, contact with the homeland is rarely lost. This truth is well illustrated on any trip into an urban immigrant community where one can observe a host of businesses that cater to helping immigrants make phone calls to the home country, wire money, or obtain the "proper" papers to get a driver's license or government benefits. Most intend to eventually bring other family members or friends to the new destination, and many intend to return back home to retire on their newly acquired wealth. One study discovered that 68 percent of migrants arriving in the city had someone waiting to meet them, and 96 percent of all help was from these individuals, not churches or government agencies.[25] The strong dependence on the primary group (usually extended family members) correlates to the inactivity of formal organizations such as churches in helping new migrants adjust to life in the city. The family "serves a protective function for new migrants to an area—a form of social insurance and a smoother adaptation during the transitional phase of adjustment."[26]

It is across these social networks that span international boundaries that ideas and resources flow. One of the most obvious of these commodities is money. In 2004, the official migrant remittances amounted to $226 billion, of which $145 billion went to developing countries in aid of extended family members and community development projects. In our own research of Mixtecas (immigrants from the southernmost provinces of Mexico) in New York, we discovered that while many worked in the lowest paying jobs at less than half the minimum wage, they nevertheless were faithful in sending money home. The money they sent back was invested in village improvement projects, such as putting lights on a soccer field or putting in an Internet café. In doing so, their status went up in the local community, and they were frequently consulted for all manner of decisions. As they were able, they would return home from time to time and eventually seek to bring back a fiancé or spouse in order to start a family in the newly adopted country.

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[25] Harvey M. Choldin, "Kinship Networks in the Migration Process." *International Migration Review*, 7, No. 22, (Summer, 1973): 163–175.

[26] Ibid., 174.

These international migration streams and the social networks they maintain serve as conduits to exchange knowledge, skills, and ideas as well as resources. While these networks may function as an agent of globalization, they also often function as a means by which the gospel is disseminated. This phenomenon is certainly not new, as there are frequent examples of how refugees, exiles, and sojourners in the Old and New Testaments served often unwittingly as bearers of the good news. In fact, one could make the case that more success is achieved in global evangelization through the natural processes of migration than in all the purposeful efforts of mission agencies.

Churches and mission agencies could respond to this opportunity in two very helpful ways. First, there is a great need to link arms with immigrant churches and the communities they serve to meet the needs of newcomers by welcoming them and aiding them in their adjustment. Certainly, the biblical support for taking care of the stranger and alien is abundant, as Israel was repeatedly reminded of their obligation to the nations. Secondly, all efforts should be made to equip and empower these migrants to take the gospel back to their homeland. The gospel, when communicated in this fashion, does not typically encounter the barriers common to ministries by expatriates because it comes through a trusted source. Local Christian agencies in the home country could then be engaged to provide nurture and follow up for converts as they come to faith. In this way, the urban church extends its impact globally through those that they serve.

Reality #7: The City as the Engine of Culture

For a long time, it has been recognized that trends and fashions seem to begin in the city and travel outward. Cities are the generators and communicators of new ways of doing things and new fads. However, Tim Keller, the successful pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, takes this concept much further. In developing his theology of the city, Keller declares that cities are part of God's plan and are God's invention to draw out the resources of creation and thus to build civilization.[27] This function goes beyond the temporal world, but it also describes the heavenly future and is part of God's purpose for humanity. As such, city building functions as a mandate or an ordinance on the par with marriage and work and is not simply a product of human effort or a sociological phenomenon.

According to Keller, cities function not only to provide refuge from the wilderness and give shelter to the weak, but they also function as cultural mining or development centers and as places to meet God.[28] Building

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[27] Tim Keller, "A Biblical Theology of the City," http://www.e-n.org.uk/p-1869-A-biblical-theology-of-the-city.htm (accessed March 16, 2011).

[28] Ibid.

off the insights described earlier by Wirth, Freedman, and Fischer, Keller argues that the city produces both diversity and a culture-forming intensity that uniquely work together to function as an engine of culture.

Clearly, high population density serves to accelerate and animate the exchange of ideas and skills from one group to another and to prevent the loss of innovations.[29] Researchers found that complex skills passed from generation to generation could only be maintained when a critical level of interaction was maintained. By shrinking the distance the communication has to travel and increasing the frequency of "collisions" between one's world and that of his neighbor, the likelihood of knowledge exchange increases. The result is "a cultural explosion" that results in innovation and energy being produced as a by-product.

Cities then take these cultural products to magnify and broadcast them over a wide region. The bigger the city is, the more power it has to promote its ideas and styles and disseminate them throughout large population groups. Los Angeles, for example, is not only considered to be the fifth most powerful and influential city in the world (after only New York in the United States),[30] but it is also considered to be the "Creative Capital of the World," where one out of six residents work in the creative arts industry.[31] Other cities around the world are known for some other major talent, influence, or product. Throughout the regions in which they are located, as well as the world at large, these cities cast a long shadow of influence. He who rules the city, rules the world.

Reality #8: The City at the Crossroads

As most air travelers know, to get to virtually anywhere on earth, one must travel through certain hub cities to change planes or pick up alternative forms of ground transportation. What is true for air travel is also true of freeway travel, railroad, shipping, communications, and even social mobility. By magnetically drawing resources to themselves, transforming them into new products, and then sending them back out to broader populations, they create intersections of people, ideas, and commodities. Like giant super colliders, they smash particles together, releasing energy, innovation, and power.

Consider for a moment the claim by some that New York is the world's capital. New York is the home of the 7 largest media conglomerates in the world, 78 cable networks, more Fortune 500 company headquarters than

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29 "High Population Density Triggers Cultural Explosions," *Science Daily*, http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/06/090604144325.htm (accessed March 10, 2011).

30 "Revealed: Cities that Rule the World," CNN, (April 10, 2010), (accessed December 27, 2010).

31 Wendy Gruel, City Controller, "Comprehensive Annual Financial Report, City of Los Angeles for Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 2009."

any other city, 6 of the top 10 consumer magazines, 6 international wire services, more museums, ballet, opera and theatre companies than any other city, 200 foreign language newspaper publishers, and over 100 foreign language media bureaus, and is served by 3 major international airports, rail lines, highway systems, shipping ports, and communication hubs.[32]

In 2010, the journal *Foreign Policy*, in conjunction with the management consulting firm of A.T. Kearney and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, ranked the most powerful, interconnected cities by measuring their cumulative scores in economics, politics, cultural, and infrastructure characteristics. Publishing their report as the "Global Cities Index," they list New York as number one, followed by London, Tokyo, Paris, Hong Kong, Chicago, Los Angeles, Singapore, Sydney, and Seoul in that order.[33] To achieve top rankings, cities not only had to be large, but they also had to project power across their own borders to influence and integrate with global markets, human capital, and political realities.

This confluence of power, ideas, and economic might is measured by the "size of its capital markets, the flow of goods through its airports and ports, as well as other factors such as the number of embassies, think tanks, political organizations, and museums."[34] Just as "all roads lead to Rome," certainly it is in the city that political power, influence, financial power, communications resources, transportation, fashion, and trade all converge to create a synergistic mix of influence like nowhere else on earth.

As strategic centers of regions and nations, cities then become high points of leverage to extend influence over vast areas. These rivers of communication that will produce fruit in faraway places can naturally buoy evangelism and church planting efforts.

Reality #9: The City as a Place for Meeting Human Need

When many people think of the city, the images conjured up are negative. Urban poverty visible as inner city slums, environmental problems, unregulated growth, social deviancy, crime, and exploitation all stand out as prominent problems indicative of the worst of the human experience. The pristine beauty of the wilderness is by contrast esteemed, and the romanticized ideal of the noble savage is used to represent mankind as uncorrupted by modernism and urbanization.

Yet, the reality is that as the world's population expands, cities play an increasingly vital role to sustain economic growth, reduce the negative

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[32] http://www.nyc.gov/html/lmec/html/about/nycapital.shtml, (accessed March 17, 2011).

[33] http://www.foreignpolicy.com/node/373401, (accessed March 17, 2011).

[34] http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/08/11/the_global_cities_index_2010, (accessed March 17, 2011).

impact on the environment, address the causes for poverty, and create long-term sustainability.[35]

> Urban development is essential—if not in itself sufficient—for economic and social development. No country has ever achieved significant economic growth in the modern age by retaining its population in rural areas. Most increments in national economic activity already take place in urban areas. These cities and towns account for a growing share of economic production because of their advantages in terms of proximity, concentration, and scale. In the context of globalized economic competition, these advantages can be heightened. Proximity and concentration make it easier and cheaper for cities to provide their citizens with basic social services, infrastructure, and amenities. The higher intensity of economic activity in cities can foster employment and income growth, the starting points for social welfare.[36]

Proximity, efficiency, competition, and scale may all be features of the economic and social architecture of the city that helps meet human need. Yet, it is especially in the city that the church has a unique role to play. As if it were on stage, the church's response to human need in the city is on display for the world to see. Indeed, "in most societies, the church's service and compassionate ministries provide the credibility for its message. Most people do not find believable, or worth considering, the message of the church that, as far as they know, 'just preaches.'"[37] Certain parts of the gospel message are better understood through the church's service than through proclamation.

Historically, urban ministries focused on meeting the needs of people have been part of the church's legacy. A.B. Simpson, founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance in the early twentieth century, established soup kitchens, homes for unwed mothers, ministries to new immigrants, and other social services that connected the church's compassion ministries to the evangelistic preaching for which he was so passionate. John Wesley's ministries included setting up funds for poor people, homes for aged and infirmed widows, a school for poor children at Kingswood near Bristol, hospital visitation teams, micro-loan financing, and so on, in order to serve people holistically.[38] Indeed, throughout the history of the church around the world, service to the marginalized, dispossessed, and poor accompanied the work of evangelism.

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[36] Ibid.

[37] Hunter, 133.

[38] Ibid., 132.

[35] George Martine et al., *The New Global Frontier: Urbanization, Poverty and Environment in the 21st Century* (London: Earthscan, 2008), 2–3.

Cities remain a strategic point of engagement to meet needs and in so doing, locate those who are receptive to the gospel of grace and hope. Such ministries easily cross cultural and social barriers and add credibility to the church's message.

Reality #10: The City as the Place for Reinvention

The nine realities covered so far speak of opportunities the city affords for proclaiming the gospel in ways that are strategic and influential. However, this last reality perhaps speaks more to our own need rather than to that of the needs of others. In fact, it might be true that the evangelical church needs the city as much as the city needs us.

Many scholars now agree that white evangelical theology in the U.S. over the last fifty years has become more suited for rural or suburban living than urban. It now finds itself ill equipped to handle the complexity and sophistication that urban contexts invariably present. A traditional faith that grows out of homogeneous village and family values has difficulty confronting the pluralism and diversity of the city. Beliefs once taken for granted are now tested with competing truth claims with the unfortunate result that many Christians either fall away from the faith or retreat back into the safety of an insular community. Moreover, a rural faith often lacks a doctrinal orientation that insists the church work beyond its own walls to serve the community at large. Roger Greenway in his book, *Discipling the City*, comments,

> Rural religion tends to present the gospel in terms that leave vast areas of human life untouched and unchallenged. Strange as it may seem, this weakness has been reinforced by countless city pulpits, especially in conservative church circles where rural attitudes continue to dominate urban congregations and popular pulpiteers keep their members socially tranquilized through rural-oriented preaching and teaching. As a consequence, one of the greatest weaknesses of some large city churches is that, so far as social consciousness is concerned, they are still living in their rural past.[39]

The problem is further exacerbated by the fact that few pastors receive training in seminary to deal with urban complexities. They are not equipped with the tools to properly exegete the context nor handle pluralistic challenges. An evangelical reluctance to engage in the city emerges from a Greek mindedness,[40] class captivity, professionalization of the priesthood, a self-defense posture, and a misunderstood mandate that leaves out compassion ministries.[41] The result of these orientations is that the white evangelical

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[39] Roger Greenway, *Discipling the City* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997), 43.

[40] Greek mindedness means that the good news is considered one dimensional, addressing the needs of the soul without addressing the physical and practical needs of the body.

[41] Craig W. Ellison, "Addressing Felt Needs of Urban Dwellers," in *Planting and Growing Urban Churches: From Dream to Reality* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997), 97–102.

church is incapacitated in carrying out its mission in the urban places of our world and, as a result, is in danger of being left behind.

To counter these trends, the white evangelical church needs to assume a new learning posture and see the city as a mission field that can teach them something vital about themselves. Clearly the history of missions shows that in the act of reaching out beyond the walls of the church to serve the lost and the marginalized, there is healing and health that comes to those who serve. Perspectives are renewed, energies are quickened, and an anesthetized faith reawakens to the joy of new life. It is in this context that new religious awakenings are born that have the power to sweep through the world. Indeed, the church needs the city as much or more than the city needs the church.

Synergy and Multiplication

Any one of the previous ten realities should provide enough of a reason by themselves to consider the city a strategic place from which to advance the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. Few ministry contexts afford so much opportunity to impact the world for Christ with an efficiency and a power as that of urban ministry.

The ultimate truth, of course, is that each of these realities is connected to the others to augment and further amplify their effect. The result is a multiplicational dynamic that further intensifies the opportunity and strategic nature of urban mission. Generating a kind of synergy among them, they build upon themselves to create a high point of leverage from which one could move the world. May God give us the humility and courage to leave our comfort zones to once again enter the world of challenge and unpredictability, and through that, be changed ourselves.

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About the Author

Dr. Alan McMahan, Ph.D., serves as a Department Chair and Associate Professor in the Cook School of Intercultural Studies at Biola University as well as the General Editor for the Great Commission Research Journal. He has extensive teaching and ministry experience in Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe and North America. Formerly he has served as Vice President for the Alliance Theological Seminary and Academic Dean for the King's College in mid-town Manhattan. He is an experienced church consultant and has served as President for the American Society for Church Growth. He has co-authored with Dr. Gary McIntosh the book, *Being the Church in a Multi-ethnic Community* (Wesleyan Publishers, 2012).