The Inner City Challenges 
the Church

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Never in history have men resided so close together yet lived so far apart. The primary fact of our existence is that we have achieved proximity without community and are forced to live in tension between the two. Even a casual glance at a cross section of modern American life suggests that we have moved beyond the rugged pioneer individualism of the last century to a crowd-centered, pluralistic existence. The misery of man is that he fails to know how to live with his unavoidable neighbor. In American cities men find themselves huddled together with others in empty loneliness and angry hostility.

We continue in a race toward an unbelievably congested world. A "census clock" at the United States Department of Commerce reveals that population in America is soaring toward the two hundred million mark with the net population going up one person every twelve seconds. Two thirds of this vast number of people is concentrated in metropolitan areas. Every day, an average of three thousand acres of land is being bulldozed to make way for the suburban sprawl. Everywhere we turn we are crowded together in high-rise housing developments, endless suburban subdivisions, and teeming tenement dwellings. In some urban areas as many as five thousand people dwell in a single square mile. In my city of New York 2.2 million employees clog the business areas with an average density of a million people to a square mile of employment area. Highways are jammed, air lanes are choked, stores are crowded, schools are packed to capacity. What a challenge and opportunity confronts the church in the city. Yet, as Bishop Wicke quotes in

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his paper, "Evangelism and the City," "the church is drowning in an ocean of humanity while hunting for men."

It is interesting to note how often cities are mentioned in the New Testament and how closely Jesus’ ministry was related to them. It was in the city that He first began to reflect on the significance of His mission. It was in the city that He announced the beginning of His earthly ministry. It was in the city that He was crucified, and it was from the same city that His resurrection was announced. The record relates that during His public ministry some cities were moved by His teaching, while others hardened their hearts against Him. Jesus became angry with the city and disowned it; He also wept over it in compassion and tenderness. The final instruction Jesus gave to His disciples was to tarry in the City of Jerusalem to receive power. Cities in His day played an important part in His ministry as they do today in ours. Technological advances have not changed the response of man to the call of the Highest.

American cities have become asphalt jungles, breeding crime and delinquency. But it is to these cities that our Lord would still proclaim His message of redeeming love and forgiveness. It was for these cities—hotbeds of racial tension, political chicanery, organized vice and sinful indulgence—that Christ gave Himself, and it is for these cities that we likewise must give ourselves in love and sacrifice.

Some months ago, forty seminary students from across America came to the church of which I was then minister in downtown Brooklyn to reside while participating in a city-wide ministry to teenagers during the hot summer months. After having spent eight weeks in a crisis situation, one of the seminarians from the Midwest wrote a poem which expressed her deepest feelings as she surveyed the needs of the inner city:

Cement is not green yielding grass,
Nor do crows nest in brick.
From my window there is no hill to rest my eyes,
No melting field,
No small white birch
To shine with sun or rain or ice.

No rabbit darts from the hedge to halt
Trembling at my footfall.
My feet do not crush fragrant wintergreen.
My face is greeted by no hemlock’s brush . . .

All these are things of home.
In these my soul was cradled, succored, raised.
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To these my heart responds as life to life,
As much necessity as food and drink.
Yet, here in the City I am happy. Why?

I see the wind in tossing lines of clothes,
The sunset glow in roseate window banks.
The rain is music on the roof and eaves.
Gushing gutters bring the sky to earth;
A roof at night hangs between two star-filled heavens. . .

But supremely it's the people.

From a lonely tower with a view
One can feed one's soul to satiety.
Human need knocks and asks and in the asking gives
For God is not indeed
   in the wind
   nor rain
   nor earthquake
But in the still small voice of human need.¹

In the city where I live and serve, ten thousand teenagers roam, out of work, out of school, uncared for and uncaring. Consequently, teenage drug addiction and venereal disease have risen to startling proportions. Despite all our scientific know-how there has never been a time of such widespread moral sickness. Headlines tell the story of crime on city streets. According to the findings of a recent survey made by the New York Post,

One out of every three hundred persons in the city can expect to be murdered, raped, robbed, feloniously assaulted before a year passes. Every minute a complaint is filed; every three minutes a thief steals; every three and a half minutes a felony is committed; every twelve minutes someone is assaulted; every six hours a woman is sexually attacked.

"And when he drew near and saw the city he wept over it."

In the midst of our asphalt jungles He still stands—and still weeps. He sees a church too often impotent because of its lack of concern and involvement. The great imperative of our time is for the church to grasp the throbbing need and to sense the spiritual lostness of our cities. For many years, we have held to the conviction that we

¹ Buffy Calvert, "A Parish Worker's Poem."
must save America if we are to save the world. It is now a transparent corollary that we must save our cities if we are to save America.

Needless to say, the church faces a gigantic task. That it is harder to reach people for Christ in the city than anywhere else on earth has been the considered conclusion of countless numbers who have dealt with the inner city ministry. Our task is made more difficult because the people of the city are depersonalized by mass living. We work in large organizations, vote in large precincts, and travel in mass transportation facilities. Individual responsibility is diluted by the magnitude of the masses. The new darkness of our day may very well be the darkness of numbers. In the city men sin, they drift, they are lost, but too infrequently they are the subject of anyone’s concern.

Again our task is made extremely difficult because city dwellers are removed from natural reminders of God. Those who live in the atmosphere of ticker tapes, roaring subway trains, screeching ambulances and fire engines, and the noise of bulldozers, are prone to forget the law of the harvest, that “Whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap.”

Indeed, in this desert of human need the church must become a spiritual oasis. Our involvement in the ministry of redemption is the most crucial single challenge the Christian church faces in this day. What an exciting venture it is; what a staggering assignment.

It is sobering to look at the facts and it should cause deep concern that the impact of the Protestant church is becoming less and less powerful in our great metropolitan areas. Membership is decreasing while population is increasing.

Time is running out. We must re-examine our purpose in mission. Too long have we been content to mark time, to follow obsolete procedures, to be satisfied in mimicking the past. Peter Marshall’s oft-quoted quip that “the modern city church reminds me of a man in a deep sea diver’s outfit marching bravely into the bathroom to pull the stopper out of the bath tub,” has in it too much truth to be humorous. The hour has come for our churches to get to the real business of cleaning up life’s bad places. It is a supreme tragedy that we often get so wrapped up in ourselves and those who look and act like us that we forsake our mission in bringing the saving, cleansing, redeeming message of the Gospel of Christ to all people regardless of color, language, or social status. Too often have we turned our faces away and walked by on the wrong side when confronted with the unsightly and offensive task of cleaning up a modern Jericho road.
"When Jesus saw the multitudes he was moved with compassion." Are we, His followers, likewise moved by the needs we behold on the city streets? Does the city see the church as a little island in the midst of human need where contented people come on Sunday merely to polish their halos, to enjoy each other's fellowship, to sing hymns and recite creeds, unmindful of the dire plight of their neighbors?

That intriguing compilation of letters entitled Dear Mr. Brown relates a bit of experience in New York City:

Some years ago the Rotary Club of New York City, through its Boys' Work Committee, made an investigation of juvenile delinquency on Manhattan Island. They found the worst block in the city, from which the largest number of boys were haled to the courts. They also found churches all around the block. These churches were not touching the boys; they were not even trying to do anything for the boys. All that happened in those churches was that occasionally the members worshiped together. . . .

An eminent Indian churchman writes about the church on the Indian scene and declares:

Both in the city and the village the Christian goes to his church on Sundays and is happy in his "Christian ghetto." He pays what he can for its support. He meets fellow Christians and is generally happy in their presence. But this sense of oneness often does not arise from their oneness in Christ. After the Sunday service each returns to the unhappy world where he either forgets about his Sunday Christianity or leaves it aside for the sake of convenience. He is not usually any different in his office from his non-Christian friends. Of course there are exceptions. But exceptions also can be found among secularists and followers of other religions.

When Jesus upbraided the cities of His day, as recorded in the eleventh chapter of Matthew's Gospel, he was not condemning urbanization as such, or like Rousseau, calling for a return to nature. On the contrary, in this very context Jesus stated clearly that God had done His greatest works in the cities. City dwellers had compelling opportunities to hear and comprehend the Gospel. It was their indifference and rebellion that caused Him to denounce them.

In the city there is a tremendous, burning longing for the truth of God wherever, whenever and in whatever fashion we offer the Gospel of salvation. People will and do respond—not always in great numbers—but always there are some. With the possibilities
for redemption so inexhaustible we should dare, with utter abandon, to give our lives to bear witness to His truth, but look at us—look at us! A frightening number of church members completely indifferent and unmoved—totally ignorant of the dynamic of God's love that is faithfully, constantly, and creatively at work through His Church.

How many of us complain about demands that are getting too heavy! How many of us decry new methods, new approaches, new programs, saying that what was good enough fifty years ago is good enough today! The church must dare to be unique in its proclamation of the Good News, it must dare to break with tradition when necessary if the church in the city is to meet the needs of the multitude.

It is essential that we shift our emphasis from membership to discipleship if there is to be a new spiritual awakening. Surely membership is large enough in the church to enable it to fulfill its mission, but disciples are few. The two are not synonymous. Membership draws us in, discipleship sends us out; membership pays its dues and demands its rights, discipleship makes sacrifices and asks nothing in return; membership involves having one's name on a church roll and giving an offering, discipleship involves participation in a redemptive ministry; membership costs us little, discipleship requires our all.

Jesus brought the fire of holy love to men at the cost of Calvary. For such scattered sheep He would be the Good Shepherd, knowing full well that "the good Shepherd lays down His life for His sheep." How eagerly Jesus seeks to aid the granulation of human life by calling men afresh into the healing and intimate bond of discipleship, fusing them into a community of redemption, the Church.

Let us pray God that we may respond to His love with awe, with joy, with undaunted courage, and with total commitment. After more than twenty years of ministry in the inner city, I sincerely believe that if we are to win our cities for Christ we must:

- Yield ourselves whole-heartedly in glad commitment to Christ's cause.

- Love with all our hearts the city we serve despite its smells and uncomely sights.

- Sense the real needs of the city and constantly take inventory to determine if we are meeting those needs.

- Not be fearful of using unconventional approaches, shunning however the bizarre and sensational.
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- Increasingly involve all people who would follow Him in the witness and outreach of the Church.

- Recognize that the city offers the greatest missionary opportunity of our century.

- Never retreat, remembering that "See How They Run" is not the theme song of the inner city church.

- Increasingly use all our physical facilities in a seven-day-a-week program.

- Never get discouraged when gains seem sparse, remembering that our responsibility is to but plant the seed.

May our Heavenly Father help us by His Spirit to meet the challenge of the inner city in this hour.

Where cross the crowded ways of life,
Where sound the cries of race and clan,
Above the noise of selfish strife,
We hear Thy voice, O Son of Man!

O Master, from the mountainside,
Make haste to heal these hearts of pain;
Among these restless throngs abide,
O tread the city’s streets again,

Till sons of men shall learn Thy love
And follow where Thy feet have trod;
Till, glorious from Thy heaven above
Shall come the city of our God!

2. Frank Mason North, "Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life."