

“The Church in the Urban World”

A Theology of the Church in the Urban World

Urban ministry is a broad-based term that focuses on serving Christ in many distinctive ways within highly populated areas. It endeavors to evangelize the gospel and edify the residents of an urban environment. Urban ministry can be likened to a mall. Within a mall, there are a variety of stores and many different activities to participate in. People visiting a mall are able to meet several needs in one location. Similarly, the congregants of an urban ministry may also be able to have different needs met by their church. Many urban ministries will seek to not only meet the spiritual needs of its congregants, but also the physical and emotional needs of its surrounding community. In addition to its church services, the urban community actively involves its congregants in ministries that can include prison outreach, social justice advocacy, shelters, orphanages, soup kitchens, English language classes, and street evangelism. The church leadership adds to that by providing counseling services and leading small special interest groups.

What is the best definition of urban ministry? There is no one definitive answer. Urban ministry is as unique as the people it ministers to. It must consider the cultural background and variety of the community in which it ministers. It needs to have a vast array of activities that show the love of Christ theologically and socially. Ronald Peters thus defines urban ministry as “a way of understanding God based upon the dynamics of the city and involves a theological praxis that seeks to enhance the quality of life for all creation.”¹

¹ Peters, Ronald E. *Urban Ministry: An Introduction*. Abingdon Press, 2007, 8.

It is illogical to believe that every urban ministry will be the same. Across the world, urban ministry is taking place in a plethora of locations, from traditional church buildings to store front settings. Some may be found in dilapidated neighborhoods with run-down buildings, while others are in beautifully constructed metropolises.

Ministering to urban communities has been the model for the evangelism of the gospel since Paul and Barnabas left Antioch on their first missionary journey. They went to major cities and established churches to evangelize, edify, and equip others to continue spreading the good news of the gospel. Jesus himself set the tone for his future church by traveling to cities, preaching, teaching, and healing those who needed it most. Throughout his short ministry, Jesus made it a point to address a person's physical and emotional needs as well as their spiritual one.

Many people who argue that the Bible is anti-urban display not only an ignorance of its contents, but also of the history of the early church. There is not a single mention of a rural church in the entire New Testament. Every example of the early church given in scripture is in an urban setting along a major trade route or a significant city. Many people who defend the erroneous stance that the Bible is anti-urban merely point out the sinful activities that take place within urban environments. It would have been very easy for Paul and Barnabus to point to the prevalence of Greek and Roman idolatrous practices in places like Corinth, Ephesus, and Philippi and the sexual sins involved in the worship of their idols and refuse to go there. Instead they developed an altruistic approach, recognizing that those places were filled with people in desperate need of the gospel. Those who believe that the Bible is anti-urban use wickedness and danger in cities as an excuse to refrain from entering or ministering in urban communities. They need to keep in mind that wickedness abides everywhere and that the whole earth is subject to the curse of sin, not just cities (Romans 8:22). Reading the scriptures confirms that every

prophet, apostle, and preacher mentioned in the Bible ministered in cities. Even John the Baptist, known as a wild, rural dwelling man, was involved in urban ministry. There is no excuse for the Body of Christ to ignore the need of the people of the inner cities by hiding in their rural enclaves or in comfortable suburban churches.

It is ludicrous to think that the Bible is anti-city considering that churches noted in the New Testament were established in places like Corinth, Philippi, Rome, Jerusalem, Antioch, Colossae, Thessalonica, and Smyrna. After the close of the canon of scripture, major sects of Christianity were established in Constantinople, Alexandria, Rome, and Moscow. As the gospel spread across the globe, almost every major city in the world today has an established Christian community, including secret churches in those countries where Christianity has been outlawed. In the eschaton, Jesus will rule the world from a city, Jerusalem, as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. All of the saints will live eternally in a city called “New Jerusalem (Revelation 21).”

MODELS OF THE URBAN CHURCH

Due to the diverse cultures and ethnicities found in urban environments, a thorough analysis of methodologies and a deliberate development of strategy is necessary to effectively minister in that vast context. Colonialism represents a previous methodology that not only failed, but caused detrimental harm. The forcing of nationalism and a culture upon foreign peoples is contrary to the example set by the missionary establishers of the early church. This worldly philosophy was tragically adopted by many mission movements, causing millions to equate Biblical truth with adherence to Western cultural religious practices. By the grace of God, many people were still able to come to Christ, despite colonialistic ideals. One lesson those that plan on ministering in urban environments can learn from this misstep is to enter that community with the philosophy of adopting or utilizing the existing culture in order to reach more people for

Christ. An observance of God's creation demonstrates how He is delighted by variety. In the same token, urban ministries using a variety of outreaches pleases the Lord. Cultural practices found in scripture can and should be reinvented and intertwined into the cultural communities surrounding urban ministries. Biblical principles should be taught with an understanding of the cultural context of the people of that community. When Christ returns he will not destroy cultural identity² and neither should his ministers.

On several occasions, God commands His people to not be negligent of widows, strangers, or the fatherless (the marginalized). When God issued his laws on Mount Sinai, He dictated an explicit directive to the nation of Israel to care for the marginalized. They are entrusted not to make them feel how the Egyptians made them feel when they were strangers in the land of Egypt (Exodus 23:9). Later, in the New Testament, Jesus exemplified the heart of God by ministering to the marginalized of his time. If the church's desire is to follow in the footsteps of Christ and match God's burden then those who minister must have a strategy to effectively reach those who are marginalized. What greater impact is there than making a difference in a person's physical and spiritual well-being? This world looks away and ignores those who are struggling, however God is always cognizant of their needs.

In his book, *The Disinherited*, Howard Thurman is constantly reminding the Body of Christ not to turn their faces away from the realities faced by marginalized individuals. He takes his readers on a first-hand field trip with stories from his own life experiences and family. He attempts to lead the reader into a greater understanding of what it is like to be marginalized, disinherited, a stranger and an outcast. Urban ministry must include aid and reconciliatory service toward sinful people whom God loves so dearly. According to Eldin Villafane, the key to

² Villafane, Eldin. *Seek the Peace of the City*. WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Grand Rapids, 1995, 49.

reconciliation is having a heart that is willing to learn and show interest in other people, especially those of other ethnicities.³

The most accurate models to pattern a ministry after can be found within God's written word. The Old Testament books of Esther, Nehemiah, and Ezra provide a comprehensive paradigm for urban ministry. Looking at a developmental timeline and the distinct roles each played, starting with Esther, then moving to Nehemiah, and then finally Ezra, gives a prospective urban minister a road map to follow in order to effectively minister to overlooked communities in need of physical and spiritual help. Esther represented the need for laws to change, and for advocacy in the legislature.⁴ God used the relationships that Esther and Mordecai had with Ahasuerus and leaders within Persia in order to accomplish His will with the nation of Israel. God will undoubtedly use relationships ministers make with city leaders, to accomplish his will in the Kingdom of God. Nehemiah represented the importance of an administrator who knows how to bring people together and get things accomplished. This would not have been possible if Nehemiah didn't have the authority of the king. Without that, change in the city of Jerusalem would have been impossible. In order for urban ministers to make lasting changes in their community, they must similarly gain support from local political powers. Building relationships with decision makers and leaders of the city is essential if they are going to significantly impact their community. Lastly, Ezra and Zerubbabel represent the ministers needed to provide spiritual leadership within a community such as church planters and pastors who minister the word of God. All three types of ministers are important – advocacy represented by Esther, authoritative administration and building by Nehemiah, and church planting and spiritual guidance represented by Ezra.

³ Villafane, Eldin. *Seek the Peace of the City*, 63.

⁴ Bakke, Raymond J. *A Theology as Big as the City*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997, 108.

The Bible not only provides excellent Old Testament examples, but New Testament ones as well, specifically, the church in Antioch. Antioch was a gateway city built between Turkey and Syria. It was also a port city, making it a crossroad between Europe and Africa. In many ways this ancient city could be compared to cities like New York and Los Angeles, which are gateway cities to the United States. People from all over the world passed through Antioch just like people today pass through the many gateway cities across the world. Urban churches in these cities could help those travelling through life reach the right destination, the Kingdom of God. Ray Bakke points out that there were five different leaders from five different cultures leading this multicultural church in Antioch.⁵ There was Simeon from Africa, Lucius from North Africa, Manean, possibly a slave from Herod's father, Paul from Asia Minor, and Barnabus from Cyprus.⁶ In providing diverse leadership, the church in Antioch was able to create a safe haven for the multi-ethnic multitudes that travelled through the city, establishing an excellent model for urban ministers today. Cities are also places where the poor and oppressed migrate, explaining why they are such multi-ethnic milieus.⁷ Multiethnic leadership teams can effectively meet the needs of a multi-ethnic communities because their cultural understanding allows for greater receptiveness on the part of the diverse community. A great deal of theological training neglects the church in the urban world, yet there are so many illustrations of urban ministry throughout the Old and New Testament. The Body of Christ has no excuse for ignoring the needs of urban communities.

PRAXIS

⁵ Bakke, Raymond J. *A Theology as Big as the City*, 146.

⁶ Bakke, Raymond J., 146.

⁷ Conn, Harvie M., and Manuel Ortiz. *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, & the People of God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001, 384.

True and lasting transformation must begin with individual believers' perception of cities. As long as urban areas are viewed in a negative light, Christians will be hesitant to live, serve, or support ministries there. Seminarians, armed with scriptural models that have a godly perspective of metropolises, are able to facilitate the changes necessary for new urban ministries to be birthed. People need to be taught the paradigms of Esther, Nehemiah, Ezra, and the church at Antioch. The Body of Christ needs to be reminded that God sees and loves the marginalized people of this world, a majority of whom live in urban areas. Knowledge is the first step of transformation. There is a great need for seminaries to provide theological training on urban ministry and provide access to that training to those who are from urban areas. Eldin Villafane is a great advocate for theological training in urban ministry calling for Centers for Urban Ministerial Education.⁸

Knowledge must be followed by praxis. One must not only be a hearer of the word but a doer (James 1:22-25). It is essential to assess the degree to which ministry resembles biblical examples and honestly evaluate its effectiveness. There seems to be a correlation between low levels of effectiveness and a lack of urban ministry. Many denominational groups have found success by spreading out into urban areas. In a chapter entitled *The City as a Power*, Conn and Ortiz cite many examples of such denominations in their book *Urban Ministry*.⁹

The Pentecostal movement is a denomination that has found global success as a result of their urban ministry outreach. There is substantial evidence when an organization chooses to serve in an urban environment. They exemplify being doers of the word by following scriptural examples, which in turn led to transformation within both the community as well as the ministering organization. Urban ministry is not something to be added to the list. It is the list. In

⁸ Villafane, Eldin. *Seek the Peace of the City*, 129.

⁹ Conn, Harvie M., and Manuel Ortiz. *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, & the People of God*, 192-218.

1980, using something they called the “encounter strategy,” the World Missions Department of the Pentecostal Holiness Church determined to focus church planting in world class cities. By the 1990’s, they had established works in over forty metropolises around the world.¹⁰ It is not surprising that during this same era, Pentecostal revivals broke out around the world. Since 1992, waves of revival have swept throughout the world and great growth continued with an estimated million new churches worldwide since the beginning of the 20th Century.¹¹

Once a commitment to urban ministry is established in the hearts of God’s people, what should that work look like? A holistic urban church ministers to the physical, social and spiritual needs of its community, being ever cognizant of their cultural complexities. Western culture has a very individualistic mindset that is not easily changed. Urban transformation is dependent on the congruence of thought and mission. A church will grow as the values of the church and the values of the community interact with one another.¹² In his book *Liberty to the Captives*, Raymond Rivera models this threefold holistic ministry as he pastors the El Camino Pentecostal Church. First, Pastor Rivera set the example himself by actively involving himself with his local community and its leaders, advocating on their behalf. Over time, his personal involvement filtered into the church and spurred action on the part of his congregation. Metro Baptist Church in Newark, New Jersey is a model church in regard to connecting with their community. During a recent service they referred to multiple things such as: a sports and recreation program for children, providing seniors citizens with tablets so that they could live stream when they are unable to attend in person, Covid vaccination and booster shots, and a Saturday job fair with FedEx. They are extremely in tune with the needs of their community and work very diligently to meet the needs of the people in order to more effectively minister to them.

¹⁰ Conn, Harvie M., and Manuel Ortiz, 202.

¹¹ Vinson Synan, “Pentecostal Trends of the 90’s” *Ministries Today* (May/June 1999, Vol. 17, No. 3), pages 60-64.

¹² Conn, Harvie M., and Manuel Ortiz, 331.

A plan for Christian community development requires a vision and an insider's knowledge of the community. Someone familiar with not only the neighborhood, but the culture and calendar as well. If the ministry leader/ship is relocated they will need indigenous mentor/s.¹³ For a ministry to have significance, it must work within the already established structures with which a community operates. These structures include but are not limited to the following eight areas highlighted by Ronald Peters: economic life, educational systems, public health, family life, religious affiliations/culture of a community, racial/ethnic issues, restorative justice, and the environment.¹⁴ Scriptural or spiritual guidance, teaching, and preaching is only a small percentage of what it takes to develop a holistic Christian community in an urban environment.

APPLICATION

Currently serving within a suburban context, this course has shown the importance of partnering with or at the very least praying for an urban ministry. The numerous Biblical examples of how the Holy Spirit used cities as magnets, amplifiers, and engines¹⁵ spreading the gospel should convince the Body of Christ to partner with an urban community or find a way to become involved with one directly. Information gained about the church in the urban world makes one question the context of suburban and rural churches. Churches that are neither on a major thoroughfare nor in a city aren't following the biblical models for where churches should be located. This class has focused on the importance of finding ways that the Body of Christ can connect with the city and view it as a sacred space and springboard for spreading the gospel. There are several cities in close proximity to where most people live. God will bless those that follow the guidance of His word. "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path" (Psalm 119:105). That path leads to a city nearby that desperately needs ministers.

¹³ Conn, Harvie M., and Manuel Ortiz, 381-384.

¹⁴ Peters, Ronald E. *Urban Ministry: An Introduction*, 159.

¹⁵ Galbreath, Charles. Module 1.1 Class Lecture.

This class has encouraged me to seriously consider relocating the church I currently pastor. It is a suburban church not located on a busy thoroughfare. It has struggled to grow in the time since the church was established. It has changed denominations three different times, none of which have had any success in growing the work. I truly believe that this course has opened my eyes to the leading cause of the struggles of this church. It was established in a location that encourages introverted Christianity instead of focusing on reaching the world. Perhaps it is time to make a change and for the church to step out in faith and follow the Great Commission beyond the boundaries of the church parking lot.

Bibliography

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