

Research Project

Pastoring the Urban Church

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## Introduction

Most churches use the word pastor to designate the head of a local congregation. It is the Latin translation of the Greek word *poimen*, which means "herdsman, a shepherd." The name is fitting because a common designation for believers is "sheep." It was used in the Old Testament of God's people, the Jews (Psalm 95:7), and is also the term applied to believers in the New Testament (John 10:3-5, 11, 14, 16; Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 5:2). It is not a very flattering designation, for a sheep is a very ignorant animal in many respects. It is in constant need of the care of a shepherd, and so are the believers in Christ. Pastoring a church is tending the Lord's flock.<sup>1</sup> In one of his lectures, Dr. Charles Galbreath describes urban ministry as "a way of understanding God based on the dynamics of the city. It involves a theological praxis that seeks to enhance the quality of life for all creation." He also describes a shepherd in the church context as one watching over the flock—not lording, but serving. He provided other terms for a pastor, such as spiritual guide and shepherd of souls. In the book *Urban Ministry, An Introduction*, Harvey Cox says that in trying to define the term urbanization, we are confronted with the fact that social scientists do not entirely agree on what it means. It is clear, however, that urbanization does not refer to population size or density, to a geographic extent, or a particular government. Admittedly some of the characteristics of modern urban life would not be possible without giant populations concentrated on enormous contiguous land masses. But it is not something that refers only to the city.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I will examine what the Bible says about the city/urban ministry, urban challenges, missional presence in a distracted and

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<sup>1</sup> John C. Thiessen, *Pastoring the Smaller Church: A Complete and Comprehensive Guidebook for Pastors* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1962), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald E. Peters, *Urban Ministry: An Introduction* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 3.

disengaged world, the importance of a pastor's interior and social life, approaches to pastoring an urban church, and a conclusion.

### **The Bible and the City/Urban Ministry**

Why Urban Ministry? God loves the city. He loves people regardless of who they are. And Jesus commanded us to make disciples of all people (John 3:16, Mt. 28:18-20). God has a particular interest in the marginalized and the oppressed. Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives. And recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18, NKJV). Psalm 82:3-4 states that we should "Defend the poor and fatherless: do justice to the afflicted and needy. Deliver the poor and needy: rid them out of the hand of the wicked." "If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren within any of thy gates in thy land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother: But thou shalt open thine hand wide unto him, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need, in that which he wanteth" (Deut. 15:7-8, NKJV).

Stephen T. Um and Justin Buzzard note that beginning with Adam and Eve, we saw a picture of individuals living in a flourishing garden city that afforded unhindered access to God's presence. With Israel, God chose a people to be His own. He set them up in the city of Jerusalem and promised to dwell with them by way of the temple. Unfortunately, their continual disobedience led to exile from the city and God's presence. God's answer to the

question of how they would get back to the city in which the presence of God dwells is through Christ's incarnation.

They write that when God's people's commitment to the urban mandate fizzled out, He personally took up responsibility for the mission, took on human flesh, and was born into the city (Luke 2:11). God became man to rescue His people. When we turned the garden city into a sin city, God broke into our history to establish, in the most upside-down manner, the foundations of a new city, untainted by sin and its effects. They write that apart from Revelation, no other New Testament book addresses the topic of a theology of the city more clearly than the book of Hebrews. For example, in Hebrews 11, by faith, Abraham chose to believe God's promise for a future land inheritance. In verse 10, Hebrews says he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

In the earliest chapters of Acts, you find an infant church that is radically generous, organically communal, intentionally devotional, boldly evangelistic, and distinctly urban (Acts 2:42-47; 1:4). The early church, though certainly not ignoring the villages and countryside, placed a strategic priority on bringing the gospel to and establishing new churches in cities. In the Pauline epistles, there is an indication that through his ministry, the gospel had made its way even into the heart of the treasurer of the city of Corinth. On top of this, Erastus had settled himself into the Corinthian community and understood himself to be connected to the Christians in the city of Rome. They add that Paul was an urban dweller whose life, ministry, writing, and death took place in cities. Paul was a city person. The city breathes through his language.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen T. Um and Justin Buzzard, *Why Cities Matter: To God, the Culture, and the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 67-84.

## Urban Challenges

In his presentation at Alliance University on March 30, 2023, Bishop Hugh Nelson states that in 2010, 82.3% of Americans lived in an urban setting. He says that the planet is increasingly urbanizing. Approximately 200,000 persons move to or are born in the city daily. Quoting Ray Bakke, he discussed three barriers to Christian involvement in the cities— theological, ecclesiastical, and psychological. Discussing these barriers, he said we will still study the Scripture through a rural lens. We can no longer be homogenous and must fight the temptation of flight or fright. In his book, *A Theology as Big as the City*, Ray Bakke writes that the spectacular growth of large cities on this planet represents a tremendous challenge to the church of Jesus Christ on all six continents. Considering the impact of urbanization and urbanism in our world, city growth is even more significant. He said one of the challenges in the urban setting is the challenge of numbers. He said it is demographic or numerical. We will add one billion people to the planet in the next ten years, mainly in Asia and cities. That's significant because the world is Asianizing as fast as it is urbanizing. These twin realities drive the planet away from the Atlantic-centered world and toward the Pacific-Rim century. It's a trend we have known for five hundred years.

Secondly, there is the challenge of migration. Bakke said the challenge is also missiological. As we move from a world of nations of interconnected multinational cities, it's clear that the frontier of mission has shifted. Most of the world's non-Christians will not be geographically but culturally distant peoples who often reside together within the shadows of

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urban spires in the metro areas of every continent. Mission is no longer crossing the oceans, jungles, and deserts but about crossing the streets of the world's cities.

Thirdly, the challenge is also ecclesiastical, for every church and denomination will face the reality that while the church may keep the same basic functions (worship, evangelism, discipleship, stewardship, fellowship, and service), the forms they take must adapt to pluralized and kaleidoscopic realities of a twenty-four-hour city. For example, churches will now require day and night pastors in all languages, cultures, and class groups. This will be a stretch for pastors, seminaries, and training institutions serving churches. Bishop Hugh Nelson also spoke about cultural diversity. He said we must learn to be intentional about and build relationships with people outside our ethnic groups.

Fourthly, the challenges are also financial. The urban mission is financially threatening because of escalating human needs and the failure of other social institutions to carry their share of the costs. Hospitals and healthcare delivery systems in U.S. cities may finally be sicker than the patients in their wards. In fact, for many, the church is the only institution that still has presence and credibility.<sup>4</sup>

Eva Wong, Director of the New York City Mayor's Office of Community Mental Health, addressed another challenge, mental health issues in our community and the church, in her presentation at Alliance University. She states that mental health includes emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual well-being. It affects how we feel, think, and act. It is a part of our overall health and well-being and can change over time depending on many factors. She states that more than 1 out of 5 adults in the United States will experience a mental illness in

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<sup>4</sup> Ray Bakke, *A Theology as Big as the City* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 12-14.

any given year. Half of all mental health occurs before a person turns fourteen, and three-quarters of mental illness begins before age twenty-four. Wong notes that we can help these individuals through pastoral/soul care, partnering with mental health providers, making resources accessible and available, enhancing mental health literacy, and normalizing mental health within the church. She says the most prominent issues related to mental health faced by believers today are resources and that people are busy and unable to provide the required time.

Ronald Peters sees alienation, fear, and violence as challenges in urban ministry.<sup>5</sup> People can be in the city and still feel lonely. There is also the feeling that they have to fight to survive. William Augustus Jones, Jr. describes the challenges in what he called social aberrations. He spoke about physical aberrations, which include but are not limited to bad housing, crowded living conditions, rats and vermin, limited sanitation services, high crime rate, inferior goods, inadequate police protection, overpricing, drugs, excessive number of liquor stores, muggings, robberies, numerous fires, lead poisoning, high unemployment, hunger, malnutrition, working mothers, idle men, and high mortality rate for infants and adults.

He discusses psychospiritual aberrations, which have to do with functional illiteracy, hopelessness, apathy, broken homes, shattered dreams, and bitter resignation. There are also economic aberrations. Money enters and departs from the ghetto community at an acute angle. There is a low circulation of capital. There are also legal aberrations. The law represents a friendly helping hand to whites, but to blacks, a symbol of oppression. Courts are crowded, jails are jammed, and prisons are packed with ghetto people.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Peters, *Urban Ministry*, 12-16.

<sup>6</sup> William Augustus Jones, Jr., *God in the Ghetto: A Prophetic Word Revisited*. ed. Jennifer Jones Austin (Elgin, IL: Progressive Baptist Publishing House, 2021), 23-25.

### **Missional Presence in a Distracted and Disengaged World**

Rich Villodas, in his book, *The Deeply Formed Life*, states that any talk of being engaged in the world must begin not with activity but with a life in God. He said we need work projects, but what matters more is the quality of life out of which the work flows. He stated that a deeply formed mission is first about who we are becoming before what we do. In some Christian traditions, doing is often at the expense of being. In others, being is often at the cost of doing. We need a life of doing that flows from being. When we are doing without being, we're liable to serve to gain the approval of others, lead to mask a deep sense of insecurity, volunteer to get God to love us more, start new things to prove our worth, and over-function, not giving adequate space for our health. Sooner or later, the consequences of doing without being caught up to us, whether in sickness, resentment, duplicity, or fatigue. Our engagement in the world becomes marked by a kind of stale obligation rather than joyful participation.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Importance of a Pastor's Interior and Social Life**

John Thiessen notes, "we do well to remember that a pastor is always in the public eye, except in the strictest privacy of his home, study, and bedroom. He says, for your character, it is best always to remember that the eyes of God are upon you no matter where you may be. For your reputation, it is just as important to remember that the eyes of the public are upon you."<sup>8</sup>

Rich Villodas, in his book, *The Deeply Formed Life*, discusses some deeply formed practices of contemplative rhythms that can be used to know God deeper. One is silent prayer, which focuses our attention on God through the simplicity of shared presence. It is a surrender

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<sup>7</sup> Rich Villodas, *The Deeply Formed Life: Five Transformative Values to Root us in the Way of Jesus* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2020), 170-175.

<sup>8</sup> Thiessen, *Pastoring the Smaller Church*, 56.

of our words to be present with Jesus. The others are sabbath keeping, slow reading of Scripture, and commitment to stability. In a commitment to stability, we withstand the disturbances and annoyances of others for the sake of union with God and each other. The goal of contemplation is beholding God and each other.<sup>9</sup> Rich Villodas also highlights the monastic tradition as an example of something our faith needs in the current world we live in.<sup>10</sup>

Thiessen addresses the pastor's social life. He starts within the home. Why? He said you will spend most of your time at home, even if you are a very busy pastor, and what you do at home will sometimes come out into the open and either help or harm your ministry. He said the home life in the parsonage should serve as an example to others. He also talks about the training of your children the way God desires. Noting also the pressure many pastor's children undergo just by being a pastor's child and how some ultimately resent Christianity. Thiessen also states that pastors, at some point, will be a guest or a host. In these positions, the pastor should always be courteous and polite.<sup>11</sup>

### **Approaches to Pastoring the Urban Church**

Bishop Hugh Nelson talked about what is required to reach the urban frontier. First, he said we should have a growth mentality. He said the world is right here in New York City. Don't duplicate what you were exposed to because you were taught. He said we are to spend time with the next generation. It indicates where the church is going. And understand that God has placed us here to impact our community. Also, we should have a sense of confidence. Do not be

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<sup>9</sup> Villodas, *The Deeply Formed Life*, 21-42.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-19.

<sup>11</sup> Thiessen, *Pastoring the Smaller Church*, 56-57.

afraid to walk into a room you don't have a degree for. We should also have a positive attitude recognizing that God is sovereign and He will not put us in a place where He will not allow us to thrive. He said you should have a committed outreach program. You miss a great investment opportunity if people do not grow while working with you. There should also be a structured assimilation program. It doesn't matter how many people visit your church; if you don't have a program to assimilate them, they will not stay. Finally, he said to teach the members how to serve the city. A church taking the initiative can shift the temperature in your community.

Bishop Nelson also spoke about having ministry goals. He said we should equip and empower members to become disciples. Mobilize the members to take the truth of the gospel to the community. Get the church out of the building. Prepare people before you need them. He also states that leadership development, community impact, and adding more properties should be some of our ministry goals. He said there are three relationship types between the church and the community. First, the church in the city—the building is just there with no attachment to the community. Then there is the church to the city. This is where there is some interaction between the church and the city. And then there is the church with the city—the church incarnates itself with the community. He encourages us to be deeply involved with our community.

In our class lecture on March 23, 2023, Dr. Galbreath and Pastor Gilford Monroe discussed what to do when visiting or moving to a new church to pastor. Some suggestions are that we need to pray and plan—we need discernment to hear God's voice. We must also research the community and church and listen to the church people. They love to talk. Get to know the influencers—those who run the church, especially those who control the finances.

There is no need to go in and try to change everything. Before pastoring any church, you have to earn the right to be somebody's pastor. They also state that we should look at the building and the bills.

They also suggested listening to the community. If possible, attend every community meeting and make an appointment to speak with elected officials. Your church should be known for something specific. They also suggest we look for opportunities like building houses, food projects, etc. Finally, they mentioned the CCDA approach—listen, reflect, and then respond.

In their book *Making Neighborhoods Whole*, Wayne Gordon and John Perkins discuss the three R's of community development: relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution. By relocation, they mean a "theology of presence." In the parlance of the CCDA, it means moving from a safe, comfortable, convenient suburban environment to a struggling, impoverished urban area. They state that there are three types of people living in the community: the relocators, the remainers, and the returners. Reconciliation, in a nutshell, is getting to the point where nothing is broken or missing. Redistribution has to do with creating equal access to power, resources, and opportunity for everyone.<sup>12</sup>

In his book, *Encounter God in the City: Onramps to Personal and Community Transformation*, Randy White states that sometimes we must intentionally place speed bumps in the path of participants when we create an experiential discipleship on-ramp in the city. Because in their well-intentioned enthusiasm for being agents of hope and conduits of practical help among the poor and marginalized, young leaders often rush ahead with plans or actions

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<sup>12</sup> Wayne Gordon and John M. Perkins, *Making Neighborhoods Whole: A Handbook for Christian Community Development* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013)47-80.

that can have an opposite effect from what they intended. Sometimes the first command must be to slow down, wait, and ensure you understand the flow you are trying to join. His first advice is to do no harm. Like physicians helping their patients, the cure must not be worse than the disease. This step is about preparing for inevitable harm as it is about avoiding it.

Secondly, he said we should check the map. We can't be careless like that as we orchestrate experiential discipleship in the city. It's crucial to orient ourselves properly toward this journey. We need not to just slow down, but pull over and consider where we are going. Anything less than serious preparation represents a callous disregard for the city. The third speed bump is to inventory the asset. Rushing to meet a need we think we've identified often fails because the need is misidentified or misprioritized or because the solutions proposed are not sustainable because they don't originate in a community or involve indigenous leaders. The assets could be a grandmother who lives on a corner in the neighborhood and cooks for a few of the neighborhood kids, or a coach working at the local elementary school for many years and acting as a father to many boys, or a small business that routinely hires young people from the neighborhood for their first job.

The fourth speed bump is that there is no quick fix. Very good ideas done without the partnership and insight, and ownership of the residents will likely be done in a way that is not appropriate for the context or sustainable over the long haul. This speed bump reminds us to avoid defaulting to anything that resembles a quick fix. Lastly, he writes about the speed bump of no charity. He says that giving is not the whole picture. Transformational leadership brings change to both parties, opening our eyes to new dimensions of faith, opening doors of opportunity, and giving birth to new prospects for community partnership.

## Conclusion

As in other places, pastoring the urban church can be a big challenge, but it can also be rewarding. As Bishop Nelson states, a church taking the initiative can shift the temperature in the community. The value of your impact is not measured by how many people are gathered but by how many you have engaged or how you have impacted the community. Dr. Galbreath and Pastor Monroe state that in ministry, you must know the people you serve and then intentionally integrate the committee. You cannot serve a neighborhood you are scared of. Finally, God loves the city, and so should we too. Let us continue to engage in the Great Commission as we await Christ's return, when there will be "no more injustice, classism, poverty, wars, hatred, killing, segregation, dying, sicknesses, hospitals, inequities, or brokenness, but Jesus will be all in all." <sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Eric Mason, *Woke Church. An Urgent Call for Christians in America to Confront Racism and Injustice* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2018), 180.

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