Urbanized Mission (Editorial Preface to the Issue)

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The urban age has dawned. For the first time in the history of humankind, the majority of the world’s population is now urban, having crossed the threshold at some point in 2008. By some estimates, in 2050 the number of people living in cities will exceed 70% of the total population. In terms of sheer numbers, the city will dominate the global landscape in the very near future. The world is migrating to the cities.

It hardly needs stating, therefore, that the future of Christian mission is tied to this wave of urbanization. According to urban missiologist Ray Bakke, mission has “moved from a world of about 200 nations to a new world of some 400 world-class cities.”¹ If twenty-first century mission is increasingly post-colonial, post-Christendom, and postmodern, then it is also, and perhaps preeminently, post-rural. Cities are the frontier of the gospel, the “new ‘10/40 window’ of the next generation.”²

Coming to terms with the phenomenon of urbanization, though, goes far beyond recognizing migration patterns. Urbanization is a “process of sociocultural shifting”³ that involves “distinctive forms of human relationships, interconnection, and complex patterns of cultural, economic, and political life that transcend the close-knit patterns of smaller communities.”⁴ Urbanization generates not one but multiple urbanisms—kaleidoscopic ways of living fostered by the urban matrix. Christians located in the cities must learn to think and live in critical dialogue with this variegated, urban world.

But it is not just Christians living in city centers who will have to respond. The urban “imagination” stretches beyond the geographical boundaries of the world’s cities through the immense influence that cities exercise in the global landscape. Cities concentrate power and resources that position them as “nodes of formal and informal, licit and illicit, global circuits.” Thus, they serve as “command and control centers” for the economic, social, political, and ecological decisions that steer global development and human socialization.⁵ These facts and figures show, in short, that Christians—urban, suburban, or rural—who proclaim a God who loves the world must learn, as never before, how to love the city.

Loving the city, it seems, has not been a strength of Christians in the recent past. Rather, much modern Christian reflection has participated in the mainstream tradition of anti-urbanism. This editorial is not the place to trace the lineage of anti-urbanism or its Christian iterations, which have been documented elsewhere,⁶ except to point out that its effects are frequently felt in Christian mission-talk regarding things “urban.” Unfortunately, Christian usage of the descriptor “urban” too often conjures up only negative realities and anxieties. What is more, “urban” is a term habitually used (even by more affluent urban dwellers!) to identify lower-income communities in the city.⁷ Because it linguistically constructs detrimental patterns of relationship, this kind of usage is highly problematic for several reasons. It can exacerbate racial, social, and cultural division, encourage stereotyping, and feed an “us versus them” mentality. Second, it can unfairly associate a whole community with deleterious behaviors that apply only to discrete parts or members within it and implicitly deny wider interrelationships, even culpability, among wider communities—urban, suburban, exurban, and rural. In addition, labeling a particular type of ministry among marginalized communities as “urban” can denigrate the gifts of faithful Christians living in those communities. Finally, such language represents a failure to imagine all urbanized communities in terms of the promise and potential of the city.⁸

The rich diversity and gifts of an urban area, however, present a distinct set of challenges to Christians who live, work, and minister in its midst. Some urban communities exhibit an intensity and breadth of social needs—needs that are
and minister in its midst. Some urban communities exhibit an intensity and breadth of social needs—needs that are frequently viewed in light of a perceived scarcity of resources. Second, heterogeneity can strain attempts to build relationships and identify common ground on which to forge alliances for the common good. Behaviors of alienation, fear, and violence that are found at some level in all geographies are heightened in many urban contexts because of the stark juxtaposition among peoples of different class, race, or ideology. Moreover, the capacity of the city to foster asymmetrical relationships and structural injustice, ensconced in bureaucracy, fractures community both locally and globally. Finally, the population’s vulnerability to larger economic forces, which, among other issues, frequently demands mobility from the workforce, can work to thwart long-term relational connection and sustained ministry efforts. While none of these issues is exclusive to the city, the clustering of all these issues in one place makes the urban arena a particularly demanding context in which to serve.

These challenges have regrettably caused many Christian congregations to adopt one of two responses: to stay in the city and develop a fortress mentality that opposes the city or to abandon the city for its outer edges. Not only does the latter reveal a failure of missional imagination, it also fails to grapple with the interconnectedness of the urban with its hinterlands. The urban fabric stretches from city center to suburban to rural communities, whose existences are inextricably tied to decisions of the urban community (and even more so in this globalized age). In short, what affects the city today will ripple through its neighboring communities tomorrow.

We need more Christians prepared for and by the city—our understanding of missiology needs to migrate, along with the world, to an urban locus. To speak personally, it was not until I entered graduate school that I first pictured “mission” and “city” in redemptive combination. Both my home congregation and the Christian university I attended fired my imagination predominately with bucolic images of mission work. My experience is obviously not universal, but neither do I think it is all that peculiar for many in the North American Restoration tradition. Global reality, however, demands that all Christians take up with much more tenacity the task of acting in, reflecting on, and promoting mission in an urban context. Like the Apostle Paul, an outstanding urban missionary, we need a God-inspired vision that imparts direction in our quest to spread the gospel in unfamiliar territory (Acts 16:6–10). According to Philip Sheldrake:

The future of human cities and their meaning is one of the most critical spiritual issues of our time. . . . What is so often missing from contemporary concerns about cities is precisely a vision. And vision or perspective, rather than some kind of definitive conclusion, is a primary theological task.

Thus, the following issue of Missio Dei aims to help fill this gap by offering reflections that attempt to re-imagine mission to urban peoples with theological verve. May our blessing be that we, like Paul, become convinced that God has called us to proclaim the good news to them (Acts 16:10).

Bibliography


Glaeser, Edward. Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer. Smarter, Greener, Healthier


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3 Harvie M. Conn and Manuel Ortiz, Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 167.

4 Bryan P. Stone and Claire E. Wolfteich, Sabbath in the City: Sustaining Urban Pastoral Excellence (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 2. For a succinct history on social theory and the city, see Michael Bounds, Urban Social Theory: City, Self, and Society (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1–62. Sociologists of the past attempted to describe urbanism as a uniform way of life resulting from the size, density, and heterogeneity of the city (the classic example is Louis Wirth, “Urbanism as a Way of Life,” The American Journal of Sociology 44, no. 1 [1938]: 1–24). Now, however, sociology recognizes that cities play host to an array of urbanisms.

5 Noah J. Toly, “Introduction to the Theme Issue: Christian Perspectives on the City,” Christian Scholar’s Review 38, no. 4 (Summer 2009): 410. He gives examples from both the economic and ecological arenas of the impact of cities on the rest of the world. For example, he notes that forty of the top one hundred economies in the world are cities, and 75% of all foreign exchange runs through four of them: New York, London, Tokyo, and Hong Kong. Cities also produce upwards of 80% of greenhouse gas emissions.

6 A good beginning point is Michael J. Thompson, ed. Fleeing the City: Studies in the Culture and Politics of Antiurbanism (New York: Palgrave, 2009).


8 Peters, Urban Ministry, 27.

9 Stone and Wolteich, Sabbath in the City, 9-14.

10 Peters, Urban Ministry, 14.


12 The suburbanization of poverty and the recent immigration debates, at least in the United States, illustrate this point.

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