

The Battle for the Cities:

What we have learned about urban evangelization since Pattaya 1980

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For the past five years I have had the privilege of leading consultations on urban evangelism in 63 large cities outside North America. Besides these major events, sponsored by the Strategy Working Group (SWG) of the LCWE, there have been visits to dozens of other cities for lectures; and planning conferences with seminaries, local churches, denominations and mission agencies. Numerous meetings throughout the cities of North America have been worked around my seminary teaching load as well.

There is not time nor space here to report on the specifics of those trips. Such reports and recommendations are given regularly to the SWG—chaired by Ed Dayton—and to the meetings of the Lausanne Associates who gather annually with Dr. Leighton Ford and others to share knowledge, encouragement and strategy.

What follows are “reflections” or “learnings” from the total experience. This brief essay will not so much report as to interpret what I have seen, researched and experienced. You who read these pages are part of the data, because we laboured together to better understand our cities and strategise to more effectively evangelise them. For you, my colleagues, I write with joy and profound appreciation for all God is doing through you in his urban mission.

Cities Are Legitimate Mission Fields

Over two billion people live in cities now and the numbers on sizes and rapid growth can be numbing, even overwhelming. *Put simply, if you take the numbers by themselves, we are losing the battle for world evangelization in the cities.* There may be well over a billion geographically distant unreached peoples who live far from existing churches who will still need traditional missionaries to reach them on every possible frontier. But there are now far more than a billion, and a much faster growing number of unreached peoples that I call “culturally distant,” because they live in cities geographically near existing churches in many instances, but will never be

reached by Christians or congregations unless new strategies—bold, compassionate, multilingual, and multiethnic—are implemented. The global world mission frontiers are coming home to the local churches in large cities.

We now know how these realities challenge us in many ways. Cities are 24-hour systems. Like police and hospitals, churches need night ministries as well as day ministries. Like our grocery stores that added Asian and Spanish gourmet and generic foods and multilingual checkers for the multiple audiences, our local churches have some clues now as to the kind of rethinking of traditional forms of ministry that it will take to reach large cities on all six continents. The urban birthrates of cities in Latin America, Africa and Asia are so high, it is not unusual to find 50% of an entire city under 20 years of age. The Canadian University professor, Michael Brake, who explored and named the diverse youth subcultures of European and North American cities in his book *Comparative Youth Culture* (London, Routledge Kegan Paul, 1985), is opening doors to exploding urban youth realities that are off the planning maps of most mission agencies I have encountered. It is both incredible and significant for evangelization that cities are now growing younger and older at the same time.

Cities continue their time-honored role as the catch basins of society for people most at risk. Populations of the old, the poor, the marginal, the sick, the single-parent households, the refugees and the deviants increase faster than the healthy and wealthy. In the nineteenth century, capital stayed in large western cities and labour migrated to the Londons and Chicagos. In the twentieth century, capital is migrating along with labour all over the globe; and the results include massive shifts of populations inside and between all six continents, with enormous significance for urban evangelists and mission planners. The mission field is no longer “over there some place.”

It is not enough to have denominational or mission headquarters in the cities for the traditional conveniences present there,

while we implement mission programmes somewhere else. Meanwhile, some cities are running out of air and water. The atmospheric toxins surrounding some large cities are so dangerous that studies show they not only impact physical health, but alter personalities psychologically. This is an interconnected world. Cities, as engines of cultural change, propel our globe in critical directions; and everyone should be concerned, especially Christians.

From a communications point of view, the urban world challenges the LCWE in other ways. In a rural area, most relationships are parochial and primary. In cities of secondary relationships, effective communication becomes much more—not less—difficult. Most of us do not see the signs or notice the faces on our streets. The visual and verbal overloads turn us inward, and we city dwellers hear and see *less* than we do in rural areas. And even if you turn up the volume or increase the activity, it will not help much. The urban communication challenge is awesome for those of us who wish to share the gospel.

Without a doubt there is more abject poverty and often more danger in rural and small-town settings. But when you bring massive numbers of diverse peoples together in confined spaces you multiply the risks geometrically, primarily because all those groups have raised expectations. The point has been made often by scholars: revolutions do not occur when or where things are as bad as they can be, but when and where expectations that they will improve outpace the reality. This makes cities *more* dangerous even while things look as if they are getting better.

The Church Is Unprepared

We knew cities were legitimate places of mission before Thailand 1980, but what I did not know until then was that no mission agencies had specific urban training requirements or programmes for their executives or field staffs at that time. Frankly, I have been astounded by these facts.

Of course, there were some very good reasons for this. Most of the unreached peoples used to be in rural areas, and the costs of doing mission were cheaper there.



Cities were often in the clutches of our theological enemies, so we opened fields where we could get through the door. The cities, historically, often had visible ministries no matter the degree of effectiveness. Significant in this connection is what one church and mission leader told me, "Ninety percent of our missionaries come from rural and small-town communities, and that is where they feel at home." I am sure the Bible school training programmes contributed also. With little formal education, you can be significant in the village but be very marginal in the city.

Hundreds of personal conversations with Christians in places like Wheaton and Pasadena have convinced me that there may be other factors in the church's reluctant urban response. Many evangelicals led their churches and families out of the cities in earlier years and carry unforgiven "white flight, white fright" guilt. Others still read the Bible as a rural book and many wonder if the God who ordered the destruction of Sodom once, and Jerusalem repeatedly, might be thinking about destroying Chicago, Hong Kong or Liverpool even now.

My studies of, and repeated trips to, the cities of the Middle East indicate that Islam is perfectly adaptable to the urban context and flourishes within it. Last spring I counted 34 mosques and prayer houses in Chicago, many doing their kind of evangelism in places where some of our churches used to be.

Clearly, our media blitzes, individualistic gospel and evangelistic campaign strategies will not cut the knots being tied around successive urban neighbourhoods

in large cities throughout the world. The urban challenge requires urban education and leadership development programmes for lay folks and clergy alike. The awareness of these issues is increasing; and I see many new programmes, journals, studies and strategies by many groups all over the world since 1980—for which I rejoice. For example, Moody Bible Institute was born out of the Haymarket Square riots of 1886, and it is marvelous to see them celebrate their centennial this year by recapturing their original radical urban mission vision.

Christian Leadership Feels Marginal and Alienated

My consultations are primarily with leaders of churches, denominations, seminaries, mission agencies, together with key lay men and women. In countless settings, I have heard these leaders describe their joys and struggles in urban ministry. Many, if not most, experience their city as an alien place. Many do not study their cities; fewer still say they love their cities. I have met, of course, those who have put down deep roots, networked effectively, and who express vision and communicate with obvious effectiveness too. But over the past five years, I would say our urban church leaders do not impress me generally as feeling good about their call to serve God in the city.

Triumphant personalities and empire-building programmes loom large on some urban landscapes. In other cities, the pastors are in known competition for the shrinking reservoir of existing Christians. Even the possibility of a consultation on evangelism

which brings them together with other leaders under the banner of the Lausanne Covenant reveals how threatened they are; so they do not come. Or if they do, they communicate defensiveness in our sessions.

In the more rural past, many denominations had whole regions or islands to themselves. Now, they often share street corners in common like many franchised fast-food outlets. Pastors feel marginal in all this, like competitors for the hamburger market. Many pastors suffer identity crises. The same mission organisations that provide marvelous language school, cross-cultural training, resources and support services for their overseas personnel, often place people in cities with no specific training, resources, support systems, and unrealistic programmatic responsibilities that preclude their ever finding out what is happening in their own city.

The Lausanne Covenant is probably the largest umbrella in the world right now under which we can gather God's people for evangelism. I am in awe of this reality. Evangelicals and Orthodox, mainline and independents, do come together to pray, fellowship, learn and strategise in our consultations.

I am convinced the collaborative style of Billy Graham, bringing diverse local leadership together in his crusades over four decades on all six continents has created precedence for the co-operative spirit of Lausanne. The SWG attempts to embody this in their consultations.

I am also convinced that the demonstrated visible love of fellow Christians across denominational lines in large cities is absolutely necessary to communicate the

reality that the gospel is more powerful than social barriers of race, language, denominations, or class.

This past summer I sat on a platform in India beside the consultation chairman, a Bishop, while we watched 33 small groups of participants fellowshiping and sharing together. We saw men and women, Pentecostals, local indigenous independents, and mainline Christians scattered all over this large Baptist sanctuary. While we watched the delightful exchanges, the Bishop leaned over and said to me, "You know, Ray, this is the first generation in the history of India that could get away with this. In the past, our mission societies kept us apart."

To these urban leaders the LCWE has an encouraging and equipping role. We can share new ideas and link them with others who are modeling strategies or programmes for more effective urban ministry. Many of our urban leaders do not experience their cities as hopeful places. Others make great sacrifices for their families in order to live with their people under difficult conditions. The mobility and changes around them add up to discouragement.

Because local leaders often feel ineffective, marginal or alienated, it is tempting as outsiders to come in and organise them to support our efforts—to do the evangelism for them. This we must not do. We can no longer evangelise these cities from the outside, but we can link up in all kinds of supportive ways to strengthen the local leadership. This is Lausanne's strategy: the indirect catalytic and supportive roles that help the whole church take the whole gospel to the whole city.

Signs of Emerging Creativity and Communication

It is amazing what a good crisis will do, first to inform and then help to set priorities. When I began ministry among the poor amid the Chicago riots 21 years ago, I was challenged to re-read the Bible. With delight I re-read the Christmas story about our Asian-born Jesus (about half of all the babies born in the world today are Asian) who became a target of violence and a political refugee in Africa (about half the refugees in the world today are Africans). How beautifully Jesus choreographed these urban realities into his experience! I had no idea there was so much significant sociology and ethnicity in the Bible or church history. My experience did not force me to invent it, but it motivated me to discover the resources

we have.

There is more. The Holy Spirit continues to surprise me with his gifts to large cities and to the church within them. God is building his kingdom. When I read Ephesians or Colossians, I see a triumphant, ascended Christ holding the structures of my city together—fueling my desire to work with other Christians on the whole range of urban issues of justice that Scriptures like Isaiah 65 talk about with such clarity. Then when I read Philippians, I see my Lord leaving the heavens and connecting with us one-on-one in the streets. I challenge urban believers in large cities on all six continents to embrace all of God's agenda for the city, for the church and the individuals within.

I am continually delighted by denominations being renewed in cities even under pressure; by seminaries that are creating new urban courses and internship programmes, and by missions that are recovering their roots. I can also testify that an incredible flower garden of different models of urban evangelism has taken root in many cities.

When I think of urban prayer strategies, I think of a group that meets on the mountain above their city and prays with eyes open from one end of that city to another. I remember another group that assigns members specific streets to pray for as they stand before each house.

Some of God's urban gifts astound me. I think of the trip to the poor Muslim slum in a large Indonesian city where I met a professional family that deliberately moved into a little shanty house amid the garbage-strewn community to love Muslims in Jesus' name. First, this Christian man took an offering from fellow Christians, and publicly gave it to his neighbours *for their mosque!* Then he helped the local



men build the mosque with his own hands for six months! Afterwards, he announced to all the local men that he was starting a Bible study in his house. When I visited a few months later there were some 35 baptised adult believers already, and an equal number of teens who have followed Jesus Christ publicly. This layman visits and prays in all the slum houses around. I do not think I have ever seen more radical Christian love in action in any city. Do you know any mission organisation that would allow that strategy?

It is such a delight in Calcutta to find that their city-wide Lausanne newsletter is typeset by ex-drug addicts who have come to Jesus as part of a rehabilitation and job-training programme. Perhaps the most effective video I have ever seen anywhere, "Bombay—City From the Sea," was produced by a man who has brought together in that city an amazing array of young leaders, who show the film night after night throughout this large city of nearly ten million persons.

I have endless stories about effective, creative and compassionate urban Christians reaching out to our cities. I experienced this in Chicago earlier when so many churches were dying, closing or leaving my city. Back then I counted and found 2,167 churches in innercity Chicago (I missed many store front and local fellowships I am sure). I was surprised to discover that over 50% of Chicago's churches, and the fastest growing by far, were black in this city where only 40% of the population is black. God is surprising me in so many ways. He has brought people from some 60 nations (out of 223 in the whole world) to the one-square-mile area of innercity Chicago I share with nearly 60,000 folks. I am continually amazed to find Latin America in Miami, Japan in Brazil, India in Africa, Mexico in Los Angeles, and Algeria in Paris. For nearly two thousand years we have been told to take the gospel to all nations. Now, we know where they are—in our urban neighborhoods! What is more, our gracious God usually brings the migrant churches with the migrating people, so we do not need to start planning from scratch in the cities. We can link up and fan the flames.

I see the visual and musical arts and drama bursting out all over the globe, so the gospel can be heard and seen by God's left- and right-brained peoples. We know that Diego Rivera created national mediums of communication and identity (for his political ideology) in Mexico. But how many churches and missions in Mexico—or any place else—do you know

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