



## Concern for the City

Author: Florence Tan, Former Lecturer and Director of Field Education, Singapore Bible College

The Bible records in Micah 6:9a, “The LORD’s voice cries to the city” declaring punishment for injustice. Jesus wept for His city, Jerusalem. He loved the people, even the Pharisees, and reached out to them with His mother-love image as portrayed in Matthew 23:37-39, speaking pointedly so that the hearers would choose to receive or reject His outstretched hand.[1] He talked to the cities: Chorazin, Capernaum, Bethsaida, Tyre and Sidon.

God’s heart had always been for the inhabitants of urbanised localities with all their cultural and religious plurality and exclusiveness existing side by side,[2] immorality and idolatry. He would be mindful of that one faithful soul in Sodom. He ensured that the thousands in Nineveh got the good news from Jonah. Therefore, just as a pastor is directed to serve in a particular church, a missionary to an unreached people group, so an individual with evangelistic objectives can fulfil a mission in a certain city to which God might lead.

Antioch in Syria was a significant city during the first century AD. A focal point of trade and industry, it was one of the places that people of multi-faith gathered. After Stephen’s death, persecuted followers of Jesus Christ made their way to Antioch as well as other areas around and beyond Phoenicia, like Cyprus. The gospel was preached and well received as mentioned in Acts 11:21.

The leadership at Jerusalem sent Barnabas to check on the Antiochan church; he ended up encouraging the healthy growing group of believers known for their social concern. He later invited Saul to join him in strengthening the flourishing congregation. It was a good training ground for the latter who together with his mentor stayed on a full year engaged in the disciple-making ministry. Antioch earned the status of being the mother of Gentile churches, as Christians there proclaimed unreservedly, “Jesus is Lord.”[3] This unique city also excelled in becoming a solid missionary-sending base claiming Barnabas and Saul (later renamed Paul) as their famous missionaries, the first mobile church-planting team. The called and confirmed pair was commissioned by the Spirit in an era uncomplicated by church rules and mission agency regulations.

For these postmodern days, Ortiz suggests multiple church models when ministering to city folk, since the populated locale is not static but is usually in a state of flux. He offers images of the prophet, priest and pilgrim to describe the holistic function of church as the new community.[4] The church exhibits her prophetic side in speaking out against sin and social injustices, performs the duties of the priest in bridging needy and hurting hearts to God for salvation and healing, and motivates each one in the journey through different phases of life. Missiological education therefore cannot escape from some degree of consideration of urban priority areas, of quality of life, health and community development for the homeless, handicapped, helpless and hopeless.[5]

What then can the simple average sincere evangelistic Christian do in the face of such giant needs – where to draw the balance of dishing out the spiritual food of the gospel and presenting a hearty meal to feed a hungry soul?[6]

Population growth has so accelerated that it is extrapolated that a billion people will be added in the present decade. The explosive numbers are found in Asia which implies that urbanising is paralleling asianising, most definitely in the Pacific Rim region.[7] It has been observed that mushrooming city-states were the result of a few major developments like the collapse of political blocks and post-colonialism, massive migration, electronic media, and prompt recovery from economic crisis.[8] For example, the UK newspaper The Times reported that 1 million moved from Malaysia to Singapore during the period of 1960-2005. [9] According to Mahbubani, “billions of Asians are marching to modernity.”[10]

Singapore is strategically located among the dynamic economies of the Pacific Rim. Blair has placed high expectations on this “little red dot,” being a microcosm of globalisation with a melting pot of different cultures, major commercial links and positioned as a hub for Southeast Asia and Australasia.[11] What Antioch did for the Roman Empire in de-Judaising Christianity perhaps Singapore can de-westernise Christianity for the unreached peoples of Asia?

It is ironical to think that the world entering the twenty-first century with a strong sense of utopia would have a premonition of doom and gloom. Many among secular observers anticipate in decades to come, colossal calamities in the form of environmental catastrophe and major governmental policy failures perhaps necessitating a one-world government.[13] Is this not reminiscent of the drama vividly and prophetically portrayed in Revelation 13?

Bible-believing people will not sit idly by, waiting for the worst to happen. Mission-minded Christ’s disciples with conviction in their heads, compassion in their hearts are committed to work with their hands, according to appropriate skills and gifting, to do that which is possible to fulfil Christ’s Great Commission.

Today many in Singapore are motivated to participate which leads some to wonder whether this cosmopolitan city-state is indeed the modern Antioch of Asia in terms of missionary effort. With an annual rate of 8.6% over 30 years of Gross National Income,[14] this island nation has already gained first-world status. With mega-churches sprouting, she has the necessary human and financial resources[15] to bless her neighbours and people far beyond her shores.

Networks of “primary” relationships can be biological, geographical, vocational or recreational in nature.[16] Workers identify themselves through the type of jobs they do. It becomes natural for like-minded persons to be found together. The cab-drivers in Southeast Asian cities can be engaged in interesting hot topics during their break at the favourite coffee shop. The soccer or rugby-mad kids would kick around or rough it out whenever there is free time. Girls love to be together going through their favourite songs or being engaged in fashion talk. The computer geeks and gaming addicts will be lost in cyberspace most of the time. It is no wonder then that nowadays “cold calling” evangelism will result in extremely little or no response.

How shall the pre-believers hear if no one is on hand to tell (Romans 11:14)? Those with hearts of compassion for the lost have tried (Romans 11:15) and they have succeeded through the blessings of conversion by the Holy Spirit. Using a medium-sized (2,000) intentional disciple-making church in Singapore as an example, here is some feedback. Conversions were registered through the ALPHA programme, cell-group outreach and personal witnessing. Many evangelistic efforts (peppered with prayer) were tried as in block blessing,[17] meals-on-wheels, movie-showing, festivals (cultural or national in nature) events, kids-for-Christ (KFC) activities, youth-biking sport, senior line-dancing, tours around the island and overseas. Several groups of church members make short-term mission trips to poor areas to serve (feed and clean), teach (simple English and Bible) or build or repair (paths, lean-to sheds, furniture, etc.). Other practical forms of social action include dispensing medicine and offering dental care or initiating faith gardens. They contact own home-grown missionaries as well, to encourage and join in ministry events during quick or spontaneous visits.

If mission-conscious believers are not venturing out, they can do as much, if not more, when remaining in their respective countries. These local tentmakers, the self-supporting professionals do go “glocal,” having and functioning with a global mindset while staying-put on home ground most of the time, traversing the planet when necessary. Such a cohort has the means to be efficient with their financial resources and definitely effective when devoted to God’s overall grand goals in making disciples.

Midge of Malaysia had been a faithful witness since her university days in the capital city. Many individuals especially colleagues, in both cities where she worked testified to her gentle ways, sincere friendship and simple, inoffensive sharing of the gospel and had been won over to the Lord Jesus Christ. Even now as a retiree, she continues to be gainfully employed and firmly entrenched in her commitment to be involved in evangelising (“going”), establishing (“baptising”) and equipping (“teaching”) as spelled out in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20).

With God everything is possible (Luke 1:37). The city may be large with numerous distractions. Amidst the bustling crowd, Jesus commended the faith of the Syro-Phoenician woman who did not mind the crumbs meant for little dogs. It really does not matter whether it is to the uneducated or under-dressed person that we are communicating with, or hobnobbing with the sophisticated fashionable well-bred in the city, ambassadors for Christ are to be ready with the answer of the reason of the hope that we have in Christ (1 Peter 3:15). Gone are the days of simple ready-made answers. Well-thought through arguments are preferred by searching intellectuals. And as Joon-Sik Park puts it, “Authentic evangelism is deeply dependent on genuine hospitality.”[18]

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- [1] Green, 247.
- [2] Michael Pocock, “Intercultural Ministry in Culturally Diverse Communities: The compass for the Journey” in Florence Tan, ed. *Missions Matrix: Navigating 21C Missiological Issues*, p. 16.
- [3] Roger S. Greenway, “Antioch: A Biblical Model of Urban Church Development” in Greenway & Monsma, eds., *Cities: Missions' New Frontiers*, p.57.
- [4] Manuel Ortiz, “The Church and the City” in Manuel and Baker, eds., *The Urban Face of Mission*, p.58.
- [5] Andrew Kirk, “A Different Task: Liberation Theology and Local Theologies” in Anthony Harvey, ed., *Theology in the City*, p. 30.

- [6] For a more elucidate discussion read Ha, Janice. "Stepping into Evangelism-Centred Social Action in Missions" in Florence Tan, ed. Creative Crossings: Navigating 21st Century Contextualisation, pp. 1-30.
- [7] Bakke, Ray. A Theology as Big as the City, p. 13.
- [8] Anthony D. King, "Cities: Contradictory Utopias" in Pieterse, Jan Nederveen, ed., Global Futures: Shaping Globalisation, pp 234-235.
- [9] The Times (UK) Tuesday, September 22, 2009: p. 28.
- [10] Mahbubani, Kishore. The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East, p.3.
- [11] The Straits Times, Friday, August 14, 2009: A24.
- [12] Edward K. Pousson, "Are we Antioch yet?" in Catalyse, Singapore Centre for Evangelism and Missions 2008/03: pp 1,2.
- [13] Clifford Hill, Shaking the Nations, p.202.
- [14] Mahbubani, p. 54.
- [15] <http://forums.vr-zone.com/newsroom/412622-news-sgd500k-salary-singapore-new-creation-church-leader.html>
- [16] Bakke with Jim Hart, The Urban Christian, p. 42.
- [17] On a designated Sunday, Christians bring fruits or bread to each household/unit in apartment blocks of ten or more storeys high to bless them and invite them to a carnival with free coupons .
- [18] Park, Joon-Sik. "Hospitality as Context for Evangelism," Missiology 30, no. 3 (July 2002): p.389.

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