

## Multicultural Churches in Global Cities

By Michael D. Crane, © 2015<sup>1</sup>

Many of the great missionaries of Christian history have been those who knew their world as well as anyone. Paul, for example seemed very familiar with the most influential centers of the Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup> William Carey compiled an impressive collection of global statistics two hundred years before the internet.<sup>3</sup> The call of the Great Commission to make disciples of every nation, means we must know our world. To add to this challenge, the world of our day is rapidly changing due to the twin forces of globalization and urbanization. In order to effectively make disciples of every nation, we need to understand our world and adapt our ministries, maximizing our ability to be ministers of the gospel.

### The Nations are on the Move...to Cities All Over the World

Every hour thousands of people pick up their lives and move to a city. Global population growth in this century will primarily take place in cities. Ray Bakke calls it the greatest migration in history.<sup>4</sup> Viv Grigg calls this the urban millennium.<sup>5</sup> This rapid movement of humanity to the cities might be the most memorable fact of our century.<sup>6</sup> Urbanization is not only about sheer numbers of people moving to cities; it is changing people, cultures, and societies at large.

Cities punch above their weight in terms of global impact. Influence and innovation ripple out from cities to the rest of the world. They have managed to accumulate high caliber leaders, thinkers, and creators from all over the world. And, because media is primarily urban, news of new products and policies spreads far beyond metropolitan areas. In other words, the average urban dweller has more influence on the world than someone in a rural setting.

People and cultures change when they become urbanized. When someone moves from a village in India to Mumbai, a city of more than 18 million people, he or she goes through irrevocable changes. Everything is different, from social interactions to work patterns to modes of survival. The diversity and density of cities uploads a range ideas and emotions that exceeds the norms for a village dweller. More often than not, this village dweller who moves to the city will never be the same.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Crane, "Multicultural Churches in Global Cities," in *The International Pastor Experience*, ed. David L. Packer (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015), 121–35.

<sup>2</sup> Paul's awareness of geography and politics allowed him to continue his missionary work when impeded on a few occasions. Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 223.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy C. Tennent, "William Carey as a Missiologist: An Assessment," in *Expect Great Things, Attempt Great Things: William Carey and Adoniram Judson, Missionary Pioneers*, ed. Allen Yeh and Chris Chun (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2013), 25.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Bakke and Jon Sharpe, *Street Signs : A New Direction in Urban Ministry* (Birmingham, AL: New Hope Publishers, 2006), 81.

<sup>5</sup> Viv Grigg, *The Spirit of Christ and the Postmodern City: Transforming Revival Among Auckland's Evangelicals and Pentecostals* (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2009), 26.

<sup>6</sup> Doug Saunders, *Arrival City: How the Largest Migration in History Is Reshaping Our World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), 1.

Increasingly, people are not merely moving to the large city nearby, they are crossing international borders looking for employment, education, or escape. This shift is even more dramatic because there is less in this large, multicultural city that is familiar. I had a seminary student who arrived from a small, rural village in Myanmar. Everything seemed overwhelming, you could see it in his eyes. He was uncomfortable with technology and elevators made him uneasy. A year down the road, he was an entirely different person. He was casually communicating on his smart phone, getting around on a subway, working in the midst of the commercial district surrounded by four star hotels and world class shopping malls. As thousands are added to our cities every hour, the amount of cultural change is almost beyond comprehension.

Although people who have been urbanized have gone through tremendous changes, churches have not. My Burmese student is expected to minister in exactly the same way he would if he was still in that small rural village. Every day he interacts with urban professionals from all over the world who are working in this global city. The church has not adapted to the realities of a rapidly urbanizing world. Patrick Johnstone alerts us to this reality: “Too many of us are hankering or preparing for a world that no longer exists.”<sup>7</sup> We need churches that are able to minister to urbanized people.

### **Hollywood, Bollywood, and Nollywood : Globalized Daily Living**

During my travels around the world when I tell people that I am from California, more often than not, they will say something about Hollywood. Such is the vast influence of the American movie industry. Hollywood’s popularity means far more than an economic boom for Southern California; these movies spread ideas, ways of life, and even culture. However, it might surprise us to know that the United States only ranks third among nations producing the most movies. India produces more movies than any other country in the world. Their movie industry, often called Bollywood<sup>8</sup> (which, strictly speaking, is only a portion of the Indian movie industry), has become popular all over the world. These dramatic films infused with song and dance have gained a faithful following on every continent. Nigeria boasts the second largest movie industry in the world. Dubbed Nollywood, Nigeria’s movie industry brings in over 10 billion dollars a year and is popular throughout the African continent and gaining popularity around the world. Digital filming technology and distribution through the internet makes global viewership a reality.

At one time, culture was more easily confined to geography. These thriving movie industries along with television and music industries (i.e. telenovelas out of Latin America and K-pop out of South Korea) are exporting more than entertainment. They are spreading cultural ideas and trends. The notion of the tribal native who knows only his own music and culture is becoming rare. Around the world, people are becoming culturally globalized. Moreover, the spread of entertainment is no longer only from the West, but it now goes in every direction.

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<sup>7</sup> Patrick Johnstone, *The Future of the Global Church: History, Trends and Possibilities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Bollywood is a portmanteau combining Bombay (the former name of modern day Mumbai, India) with Hollywood. Much of the Hindi language movie production comes from the industry in Mumbai.

Education has become a globalized industry. More and more young people are going across borders to study in universities. The trend used to be students going to a few English-speaking Western countries for university education. This is no longer the case. Millions of students are going all over the world to study. Not only are students going global, but universities are, as well. For example, the University of Nottingham has moved beyond one campus in England. They now have full campuses in Ningbo, China and Semenyih, Malaysia, attracting students from every corner of the globe. The reason for the university's global stretch is posted on their website: "Internationalisation is at the heart of everything we do as a university."<sup>9</sup> I have come to know a number of graduates of this university and have seen them take jobs in cities all over the world working for multinational corporations like BP, Intel, Bechtel, and Accenture. They are the new citizens of a global, urban professional class. Even those who return to their home country often find that they are more comfortable among the international community. Internationalized universities are creating culturally globalized citizens who are seeking to be a part of a like-minded community.

In addition to the millions who cross borders to study, there are 215 million international migrants.<sup>10</sup> Statistics are difficult to track because there is so much fluctuation of peoples travelling to other lands for work or to escape troubled circumstances. In my neighborhood in a Southeast Asian city I can stroll from my home to my office and easily encounter people from Nepal, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, China, France, Nigeria, Russia, and Mongolia. The presence of such an international community even changes those who have not crossed borders. Cultures around the world remain distinctive in many ways but they are also becoming globalized. An Economist article a few years ago noted that, for the first time in history, it is normal to be foreign.<sup>11</sup> Cities like London and New York have been intersections of the nations for decades. Now cities like Guangzhou in China have a section of the city devoted to selling goods to Africans living in the city.<sup>12</sup> Cities are rapidly becoming more multicultural.

People are moving all over the world for one reason or another. Patrick Johnstone urges the church to reflect on the implications of globalization for ministry:

The scale of movement of people from one continent to another is unprecedented in history, and will be a major preoccupation for governments for much of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It is vital that we all realize the social, cultural, economic, political and spiritual implications and prepare for this inevitable, unstoppable reality.<sup>13</sup>

The forces of globalization and urbanization have fostered an increased multiculturalism that is changing societies, particularly the urban ones. Even as so much change has occurred, the church lags behind. It is time to plant churches in cities all over the world that cater to this growing segment of the world's population.

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<sup>9</sup> "The University of Nottingham," February 9, 2015, <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/>.

<sup>10</sup> Phillip Connor, *Immigrant Faith: Patterns of Immigrant Religion in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 16.

<sup>11</sup> "Being Foreign: The Others," *The Economist*, December 17, 2009, <http://www.economist.com/node/15108690>.

<sup>12</sup> "Africans in Guangzhou," *People's Daily Online- English*, April 24, 2014, <http://en.people.cn/98649/8607801.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Johnstone, *The Future of the Global Church*, 4.

## Global Trends Creating the Need for International Churches

We have seen the big picture impact of urbanization and globalization. In the midst of these world-changing movements there are a few trends that create an open door for multicultural churches in international cities.

### *English is the New Latin*

As the world globalizes, the number of languages spoken around the world is in steady decline. It is economically advantageous to master a global language. More people from more diverse parts of the world are speaking fewer languages.<sup>14</sup> English is a leader among global languages and is the most important language in international business.<sup>15</sup>

At one time English was the language of the West brought with colonization. This is no longer the case. All around the world English is used in parliamentary meetings, business negotiations and university lectures. For many millions English is a first language, and for billions more it is an important second language. The second largest English speaking population in the world is in India, and it is the only language spoken in every part of the country.<sup>16</sup> Even in countries that do not use English heavily, like Indonesia, English is still a required subject in every year of grade school, and universities often use English textbooks for most science and math courses. Those working in multi-national corporations or institutions must be conversant in English. After the tsunami struck the shores of Indonesia over ten years ago, more than 800 disaster relief organizations from all over the world provided assistance. English was the language of inter-agency meetings and in most offices.

When I think of my Kazakh neighbor in Southeast Asia, there is little chance of finding a Kazakh church or even one worshipping in Russian. His primary opportunity to hear the gospel is through an English-speaking multicultural church. While the loss of so many languages is lamentable, it provides an opportunity for multicultural churches to be planted.

### *A Palette of Choices*

When people move to another country they are uprooted from their normal cultural constructs. Global cities cater to the vast diversity of the world in terms of entertainment as well as worship. For those who are already Christians, there is a need for an international community of Christians who can welcome them. Without this option, well-intentioned Christians can become unmoored from their faith foundation. For those who are not Christians, the presence of a multicultural church offers the perfect opportunity to “try out” Christianity.

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<sup>14</sup> Harm De Blij, *The Power of Place: Geography, Destiny, and Globalization's Rough Landscape* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 32–34, <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/the-power-of-place-harm-de-blij/1116790708>.

<sup>15</sup> Dorie Clark, “English - The Language of Global Business?,” *Forbes*, October 26, 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/dorieclark/2012/10/26/english-the-language-of-global-business/>.

<sup>16</sup> Brian Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Billy Graham and John Stott*, vol. Vol. 5, *A History of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 22.

The diversity of cities means an urbanite has a palette of options. Urbanites have grown accustomed to options, whether it is a choice of doctors, stockbrokers, or baristas. This is as true religiously as it is culturally. Rodney Stark studied the spread of Christianity in the early church in *Cities of God*. He not only sees Christianity as an urban movement, but he notes that churches were established first in those cities that were most heterogeneous (diverse).<sup>17</sup> From these cities Christianity took root among the diverse citizens and spread to other cities and the countryside. The presence of people from other cultures and temples of other faiths increased the likelihood of Christianity becoming established there.<sup>18</sup>

Today, global cities can serve the same function as those Roman cities located on trade routes in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries. Establishing multicultural churches in global cities, even in countries with minimal Christian presence, can become a launching point for more churches to be planted in the region.

### *New Points of Contact*

My friend Andrew<sup>19</sup> was raised in Bucharest, Romania. His early life was influenced by communist atheism. As communism decreased, Andrew saw the importance of global financial services and knew he needed to master English. There was an international church in his city that offered English classes. Andrew went to the English church services for further English practice. He came to faith in Christ through the teaching at the international church and now lives in a predominantly Muslim city working in the banking industry as a witness of the gospel.

By the time Andrew began to attend the international churches there were plenty of local, Romanian churches he could have attended. But for Andrew his initial interest was not in Christianity, but in English. International churches are not merely for expatriates in a foreign land, but can draw many locals who, for one reason or another, would not have attended local churches. Some are attracted to the multicultural nature of the church, others are drawn to those who work in similar careers, and others may see an international church as a better fit culturally than local churches. In any case, international churches can be an initial point of contact for someone who has never heard the gospel.

### **A Great Commission-Sized Opportunity**

The church has a primary calling to be a multiplicative witness to Christ in the world (Acts 1:8). The substance of that calling is to make disciples who know Christ and follow the teachings of Christ of every nation (Matt. 28:18-20). We must now proceed to make the connection between these trends of urbanization and globalization and the calling of the church to be Christ's witnesses.

### *Making Disciples of All Nations*

Our calling is to make disciples of all nations. Remarkably, God has brought the nations to our cities. "Those most likely to be the least evangelized at the end of the twentieth century

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<sup>17</sup> Rodney Stark, *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 79–81.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 80, 113.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew's name is changed out of respect for his privacy.

have congregated in the urban centers of the world.”<sup>20</sup> In many rural areas it is common to find only the elderly and children. The young adults have all gone to the cities. There are over 300 hundred different languages spoken in London.<sup>21</sup> Countries like India are made up of hundreds of different linguistic groups. The city of Chennai alone has 200 migrant groups.<sup>22</sup> The nations have come to the cities and are more open to the gospel than in their home towns. I have seen friends baptized who come from extremely oppressive environments. Their entry into a large, multicultural city allows them the space to explore Christianity without fear of imprisonment or death. Due to the more public profile of a multicultural church, there are many opportunities to lead to faith those who have never heard the gospel.

People groups appear to be more culturally distinct in their rural settings. Traditional missions strategies have focused on starting churches that appeal to these traditional cultures. When people move into cities, they become more culturally blended. Many intermarry with those from other people groups. Traditional cultural identity fades for many urbanites as they become global citizens. Our missions strategies need to catch up to these contemporary realities. As the nations move to cities, they become intermingled and complex. Multicultural churches are needed to disciple all the nations arriving in the cities.

### *Discipleship at Critical Times*

Another friend got a lucrative job in a global city as an engineer. He and his family were Christians and visited several local, English-speaking churches in their city. Each visit was more discouraging than the one before. They felt culturally at odds with the more homogeneous culture of the local churches. Soon they gave up trying to attend a church. Each month away from any Christian community created doubts about their faith and their children were growing up without any connection to the church. When an international church was started in their neighborhood, they decided to give church one more try. Immediately, they felt at home amongst this multicultural blend of people. Soon the whole family was connected into the church, their children were baptized, and they were all growing as disciples.

Moving to another country can be enormously disrupting to a person. At such critical points of transition it is easy to lose a firm grip on one’s core beliefs. Multicultural churches provide an important service in helping people grow in their faith in Christ in the midst of personal turbulence. Whether the person is suddenly working in a lucrative job with all of the expatriate compensation benefits or a migrant worker living off a meagre wage, moving to another country opens the door for temptations and life complications never before faced. Couples may go overseas happily married and return to their home country divorced. A vibrant multicultural church community can be ready to provide biblical counsel and community.

The church also has an opportunity to reach out to people with the life-giving good news of Jesus Christ during these times of transition. Studies have shown people have a higher

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<sup>20</sup> Judy Raymo, “Urban Pilgrims and Pioneers: WEC International and the World’s Cities,” *Urban Mission*, June 1998, 43.

<sup>21</sup> Phil Wood and Charles Landry, *The Intercultural City: Planning for Diversity Advantage* (London; Sterling, VA: Routledge, 2007), 25.

<sup>22</sup> Samuel Saravanan, “Urban Evangelism in India: A Missiological Exploration,” *Hindustan Evangelical Review* 7 (2014 2013): 26.

receptivity to the gospel upon arriving in a new city.<sup>23</sup> There are some who move from city to city every few years. The only opportunity for some so transient to hear the gospel is through the outreach of a multicultural church.

### *Multicultural Churches: A Signpost of the Gospel*

In two places in Revelation (5:9 and 7:9) we are given beautiful snapshots of worship in the life to come. In both passages the worship includes people from every nation, tribe, people, and language. It is the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, that all the nations would be blessed through him. It also provides hope as we are sent out to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18-20). Our destiny, as believers in Christ, is supremely multicultural.

The current divisions and discord between different ethnic groups is not a sign of hope but rather of brokenness. Jesus entered a world torn by division and discord. In his death and resurrection he has eviscerated the "dividing wall of hostility" (Eph. 2:14, ESV). Through his blood all things have been reconciled (Col. 1:20). In other words, Christ's work on the cross was not merely for the sake of individuals; he was drawing us together as one new humanity.<sup>24</sup> For the early church this was not mere theory. We can see from the church in Antioch and through the letters that Paul wrote to churches that the church was intended to display God's new humanity. The coming together of ethnic groups as one body is directly reflective of the work of Christ. Multicultural churches today can stand as remarkable displays of the gospel.

Cities are the quintessential gathering points of humanity. The church has an incredible opportunity to display Christ's marvelous work of reconciliation as they work to start and lead multicultural churches. Troy Bush, pastoring in a multicultural area of Atlanta, says: "Each congregation in the city should be moving toward the inclusion of all peoples that seek after God and become followers of Jesus Christ..."<sup>25</sup> Multicultural churches play a vital role in fulfilling the Great Commission.

### **Conclusion**

A deeper understanding of our world and our calling should inform the ways we minister in our world. Urbanization is drawing people to our growing cities. Globalization is creating a mix of cultures and peoples in our cities. Just as Paul was able to use the common language of Greek to start churches throughout the Roman Empire, we have an opportunity to use the common language of English to start churches in cities throughout the world. With the incredible blending of cultures and peoples in our cities, multicultural churches are able to be vital partners in fulfilling the Great Commission. International churches are uniquely positioned to display the work of Christ in making us one new humanity.

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<sup>23</sup> David Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: A Guide for Home and Foreign Missions* (Grand Rapids Mich.: Baker Book House, 1980), 99; Paul Hiebert and Eloise Meneses, *Incarntional Ministry: Planting Churches in Band, Tribal, Peasant, and Urban Societies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 273.

<sup>24</sup> David E. Stevens, *God's New Humanity: A Biblical Theology of Multiethnicity for the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2012), 96.

<sup>25</sup> Troy L. Bush, "Urbanizing Panta Ta Ethnē," *Journal of Evangelism and Missions* 12 (n.d.): 13.

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