

Urbanizing the Church in an Urbanizing Asia

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I. Introduction

We are now living in what many are dubbing the “urban century”² and much of this urbanization is taking place in Asia and Africa. All of the trends indicate that Asia will have more and more of a global leadership role and will contribute significantly to the shaping of our future. Even as the cities of Asia grow in size and influence, without the transformative influence of the gospel these cities remain on a dehumanizing trajectory. The church in the city can and should play a vital role in the welfare of the city. This paper will highlight trends related to urbanization in Asia and draw together some suggestions for the Asian urban church so that it is positioned to reach these ever-growing cities and the world under their influence.

This paper is intended to briefly draw out significant trends related to the growth of cities, particularly in Asia and respond to these trends with suggestions for the urban churches of Asia to consider. While there are some common trends related to urbanization around the world, there are also some unique factors pertaining to Asian cities that differ particularly from urbanization in Western nations. Much of Asia experienced some level of colonization that has impacted

² Lance Jay Brown and David Dixon, *Urban Design for an Urban Century: Shaping More Livable, Equitable and Resilient Cities* (New York, NY: Wiley, 2014); Robert Ian McDonald, “Urban Ecology for the Urban Century,” *Ecosystem Health and Sustainability* 2, no. 7 (July 2016): n/a, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ehs2.1221>.

urban design, governance, nation-building, and identity.³ Additionally, many nations are undergoing the changes brought by industrialization, globalization, urbanization, and information technology at once.⁴ Many Western cities underwent these changes more gradually. These factors effecting Asian cities are complex and intertwined, and naturally they impact the worldview framework of the citizens of Asian cities.

A couple of caveats need to be stated. First, Asia's size and diversity prevent a treatment that is equally applicable to the whole continent. More of the research and examples will relate specifically to Southeast Asia, with additional data from South Asia and East Asia that informs this research as well. Second, a thorough treatment of the effects of urbanization in Asia can't be undertaken in this paper. The reader will find footnotes referencing a number of helpful and more thorough treatments of urbanization and Asian cities.

II. Urbanization Trends

A. Urban Growth

1. Unprecedented city sizes

The urban growth numbers are staggering. Conversation has escalated from megacities to supercities and metacities.⁵ Asia is the locus of this urbanization. Asia, already the most populated continent by far (nearly 60% of the world's people live in Asia), is rapidly urbanizing. Already 14 of the world's largest cities (factoring the whole built-up urban area) are found in Asia, including the top eight.⁶ With the growth of cities, there will be growth of commerce, production, and innovation. Corporations recognize the tremendous consumer value of this urbanization and are investing in regional offices and headquarters in these emerging global cities. A. T. Kearney compiles 27 metrics on 125 global cities to rank their global influence. Of the 125 cities, 58 of the cities are Asian.⁷

One billion Chinese are expected to be in China's cities by 2020. Right now 100 million rural Chinese are being moved to the cities.⁸ Their stated goal is for China to be 60% urban.⁹ Considering China's population, this planned urbanization policy makes for an unprecedented scope of urban planning, building, and administrating unlike anything we have seen in history.

³ See Ryan Bishop, John Philips, and Wei Wei Yeo, eds., *Postcolonial Urbanism: Southeast Asian Cities and Global Processes* (New York: Routledge, 2003). "The internal mental structures of colonial power outlive their epoch. Habits of thought, from the most inconsequential practices of everyday life through to the most highly formalized systems of philosophical abstraction, still reproduce inherited and often unseen colonial mentalities." Anthony King, "Actually Existing Postcolonialisms: Colonial Urbanism and Architecture after the Postcolonial Turn," in *Postcolonial Urbanism*, 167.

⁴ Malcolm McKinnon, *Asian Cities: Globalization, Urbanization and Nation-Building* (Copenhagen, Denmark: NIAS Press, 2011), 4.

⁵ Patrick Johnstone, *The Future of the Global Church: History, Trends and Possibilities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011), 6.

⁶ Wendell Cox, "Largest Cities in the World: 2016," *New Geography*, April 16, 2016, <http://www.newgeography.com/content/005219-largest-cities-world-2016>.

⁷ AT Kearney, "Global Cities 2016," *Global Cities Index*, 2016, <https://www.atkearney.com/research-studies/global-cities-index>.

⁸ Lily Kuo, "Why China's Cities Need to Get Denser, Not Bigger," *The Atlantic Cities: Place Matters*, March 25, 2014, <http://www.theatlanticcities.com/politics/2014/03/why-chinas-cities-need-get-denser-not-bigger/8716/>.

⁹ "China Unveils Landmark Urbanization Plan," *News Service, Xinhuanet*, March 16, 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-03/16/c_133190495.htm?_ga=1.72585363.1493930855.1396398327.

China boasts 600 cities of more than 100,000 citizens¹⁰ and 160 cities with a population of a million or more.¹¹ In Eastern Asia alone, 12 of 25 megacities (10 million or more) are in China. China is also aggressively combining urban agglomerations that are creating new urban configurations.¹² This means more than simply a change of address for most Chinese citizens; it means changes in lifestyle, vocation, and even worldview.

South Asia displays extraordinary urbanization even without the extent of the built infrastructure of China. Millions have been moving to the cities of South Asia since the 1970s. Another 250 million people are going to be added to the urban population in the next 15 years.¹³ India is 35-40% urban with 45 cities of over a million.¹⁴ The city of Chennai has 200 migrant groups.¹⁵

Southeast Asia also has its share of booming metropolises, boasting ten metropolitan areas in the world top hundred.¹⁶ These growing Southeast Asian cities are home to rich ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity. Many of these cities are global conduits for transnational flows of migrant workers, refugees, students, and tourists. Southeast Asian cities have become economic powerhouses, with six in the top 15 cities in the world for metropolitan economic output per person, and Singapore is second only to New York City. Westerners have been slow to realize the prosperity of this part of the world. The outcome of the study is overwhelming proof that urbanization in Southeast Asia has also propelled economic prosperity.¹⁷

The numbers, both demographic and economic, tell us of a seismic shift that demands we take notice of Asian cities on the rise that will impact the whole world.

2. Peri-urban masses

The dramatic growth of cities has not been even or equal. The glitzy, glass-wrapped skyscrapers only represent a fraction of the city. The average person to make their way to the city, however, will enter at the fringes, a space that somehow combines village life with city life. “Most of the

¹⁰ Tanvi Misra, “East Asia’s Massive Urban Growth, in 5 Infographics,” CityLab, January 30, 2015, <http://www.citylab.com/housing/2015/01/east-asias-massive-urban-growth-in-5-infographics/384960/>.

¹¹ Alex Frew McMillan, “Rise of China’s 2nd and 3rd Tier Cities,” CNBC, February 10, 2011, <http://www.cnbc.com/id/41420632>.

¹² The Pearl River Delta project and Jing-Jin-Ji project are prime examples. H.P. describes the Jing-Jin-Ji project: “An extreme example of how the Chinese government wants to push urbanization is the recent formalization of plans for “京津冀” (Jing-Jin-Ji), a city that will be the size of the US State of Kansas and have a population of 130 million. This super city will comprise Beijing, Tianjin, and parts of Hebei Province.” H P, “The Challenge and Opportunity of Urban Ministry in China,” *Mission Round Table* 11, no. 3 (December 2016): 11; Michael J. Enright, Edith E. Scott, and Richard Petty, “The Greater Pearl River Delta: A Report Commissioned by Invest Hong Kong, 6th Ed.” (Hong Kong: Invest Hong Kong, May 2010).

¹³ Peter Ellis and Mark Roberts, *Leveraging Urbanization in South Asia: Managing Spatial Transformation for Prosperity and Livability* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2016), 1.

¹⁴ Samuel Saravanan, “Urban Evangelism in India: A Missiological Exploration,” *Hindustan Evangelical Review* 7 (2014 2013): 26.

¹⁵ Saravanan, 26.

¹⁶ “Largest Cities in the World (2015) - Worldometers,” Worldometers, 2015, <http://www.worldometers.info/population/largest-cities-in-the-world/>.

¹⁷ Richard Florida, “Does Urbanization Drive Southeast Asia’s Development?: How the Creative Class Is Affecting Economic Growth in Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam,” CityLab, 2017, http://www.citylab.com/work/2017/01/southeast-asia-martin-prosperity-institute/511952/?utm_source=nl__link2_011817.

meta-cities will be vast, poorly governed and chaotic, with a huge proportion of their population living in slums in dire poverty.”¹⁸ Jeb Brugmann tells of the forming of an instant community on the edges of Machala, Ecuador:

While some constructed the stilt houses, others stood guard with machetes. By the dawn of their first Machala day the construction work was done and they had started their new city life: creating animal pens, securing new jobs, and organizing politically to secure land titles, rights, roads, and water systems. Together, they were joining the largest grassroots movement ever known to this world: a movement of hundreds of millions of people that has transformed marshlands, estuaries, forests, fields, and hillsides everywhere to build and secure their claim to the emerging global City.¹⁹

Most often cities are not designed for the urban poor, yet more than half of the global urban population is classified as poor. This means that the poor communities must forge their own path of survival. Nevertheless, despite hardships at every turn, the urban poor are increasing at a faster rate than other segments and will have a significant shaping influence on cities.

B. Urban Connectivity

1. Global cities

There was a time when only a few select cities could claim to be global cities. Now global cities are springing up in every corner of the globe and for different reasons. Bangkok, being regularly rated as the most visited city in the world, has a global feel because of tourists. Singapore and Hong Kong are global cities because of their financial services. Kuala Lumpur has become a financial services hub for the Muslim world. Macau attracts the world as an entertainment destination. “There is no one way to be a global city.”²⁰ A recent Brookings report has classified seven different types of global cities, each having global impact.²¹

London is more connected to New York than it is to Leicester.²² “Global cities have more to do with other global cities along the global circuit than they do with closer but weaker cities.”²³ This means we need to begin understanding urban cultures in more tones than the previous dual tones of urban and non-urban. Cities are changing us and different kinds of cities are changing us differently.

¹⁸ Johnstone, *The Future of the Global Church*, 6.

¹⁹ Jeb Brugmann, *Welcome to the Urban Revolution: How Cities Are Changing the World* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), 4.

²⁰ Jesus Leal Trujillo and Joseph Parilla, “Redefining Global Cities: The Seven Types of Global Metro Economies” (The Brookings Institution, 2016), 2, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/redefining-global-cities/>.

²¹ The seven types used in the report are: global giants, Asian anchors, emerging gateways, factory China, knowledge capitals, American middleweights, international middleweights. Trujillo and Parilla, “Redefining Global Cities: The Seven Types of Global Metro Economies.”

²² Harm De Blij, *The Power of Place: Geography, Destiny, and Globalization's Rough Landscape* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 183, <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/the-power-of-place-harm-de-blij/1116790708>.

²³ Richard Longworth, *On Global Cities*, Kindle ed. (Chicago: Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2015), kindle location: 254.

2. Transnational networks noded in cities

The fact that London is more connected to New York than Leicester also tells about the interconnectivity of cities. “Today, members of a vast and complex network of cities participate in international flows of goods, services, people, capital, and ideas, and thus make distinctive contributions to global growth and opportunity.”²⁴ This is an economic reality. There is a link between countries that are more internationally connected and economic growth. They have GDP that averages 40 percent higher than countries that are less connected.²⁵ These countries connect through their cities.

C. Urban Flows

“If ‘place’ defined the industrial city, ‘flow’ defines the global city.”²⁶ William Lacy Swing, Director General of IOM says: migration is a global phenomenon with 750 million internal migrants and 258 million international migrants living away from their point of origin.²⁷ This amounts to more than a billion people on the move. The flow extends to virtually every city in the world. Some cities become depots or major intersections. These cities wield greater influence. To put it a different way, as Grand Central Station is to New York City, so is a city like Singapore to the world. This goes beyond the masses that flow through Changi International Airport. Children of Myanmar’s ruling junta study in Singapore and the former Prime Minister of Thailand is staging a comeback from Singapore and Hong Kong. This gives Singapore weighty influence on politics in other nations.

1. Rural-urban flows

Three million people are moving to cities around the world every week.²⁸ Still, most of the urbanization occurring in Asia is moving from rural areas to urban areas. Indonesia is a good example of this trend, having recently crossed over the 50 percent urbanized threshold. With 4.1 percent urban growth per year, the nation has shifted from an agrarian-based economy to an economy based on services and industry. These demographic movements in this one nation represent a global movement of 763 million people migrating internally.²⁹

2. International-urban flows

With increased mobility and access to information, more people than ever are moving across boundaries. Just as with rural-urban migration, international-urban migration involves push and pull factors. Kuala Lumpur has many thousands of refugees who have been pushed from their homelands due to factors in their country of origin. There are also many thousands in Kuala Lumpur who’ve been drawn by opportunities for study or work. This trend of international-urban migration impacts the country of origin as well as the destination city culturally, socially, and economically.

²⁴ Trujillo and Parilla, “Redefining Global Cities: The Seven Types of Global Metro Economies,” 2.

²⁵ Trujillo and Parilla, 8.

²⁶ Longworth, *On Global Cities*.

²⁷ William Lacy Swing, “Megatrends for the 21st Century” (World Urban Forum 9, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, February 13, 2018).

²⁸ Swing.

²⁹ Ashish Xiangyi Kumar et al., “Policy Briefs on Internal Migration in Southeast Asia” (UNESCO, February 8, 2018), <http://bangkok.unesco.org/content/policy-briefs-internal-migration-southeast-asia>.

3. Urban-urban flows

In Asian nations that are already highly urbanized, the movement of people is from one city to another. Malaysia, being already 75.2 percent urban, now sees most of the internal migration as urban-urban migration.³⁰ This flow is not limited to internal migration. Urban professionals having increased mobility to cities outside of the country of origin. In an economy that is more globally linked, global cities are beginning to share more of an affinity with each other than with the towns and villages in their own countries.³¹

D. Urban Spatial Impact

1. Built environment is changing culture

For good and for bad, the built environment is altering the ways we live and move and interact with other. Dwellings can be conducive to social interaction or reduce it. Roads and public transportation can move people through the city in ways that increase human well-being or decrease it. Public space and parks can be created to fulfill a law/quota or can be created to enhance social vibrancy. Districts of a city can be used to divide the city or integrate the city.

In many cities, apartment living is now the norm. Apartments are not merely an economic solution to rising land prices, but they are changing the ways people live and interact. The increasingly vertical orientation of our cities is taking people further away from the places of intersection, which is the place where so much social negotiation has taken place.³² The pace at which things are changing is further aggravating social norms. In China the old neighborly *hutongs* are being replaced by skyscrapers and roads only designed for efficient movement of people.³³ The impact this will all have on cultural and interpersonal relationships is still unfolding, but it will be a dramatic change.

Increasingly, Asian cities have less and less public space which is pushing people into private, consumer-driven spaces. How does this shift to privatization of space effect society? There are many aspects of the built environment that are changing us without us even knowing it.

2. Infrastructure Demands Outpace Capacity

The sheer enormity of the building cities must accomplish in order to hold the numbers of people agglomerating in them is staggering. William McDonough notes in a recent issue of *Scientific American*:

As cities go, so goes the planet. And cities are growing—fast. By 2030, according to the latest United Nations estimates, five billion people will live in cities, nearly half of them conducting their lives in homes, schools, workplaces and parks that do not yet

³⁰ Kumar et al.

³¹ Hans-Dieter Evers and Rudiger Korff, *Southeast Asian Urbanism: The Meaning and Power of Social Space* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 2.

³² AbdouMalik Simone, *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar: Movements at the Crossroads* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 104.

³³ John Farndon, *China Rises: How China's Astonishing Growth Will Change the World* (London: Virgin Books, 2007), 73.

exist...cities can play an outsized role in creating solutions for a more sustainable world.³⁴

The ancient Lao city of Luang Prabang has a population of roughly 56,000 inhabitants. In contrast, I live in a small neighborhood in Kuala Lumpur that was built less than twenty years ago and already has a population of 60,000. New neighborhoods and entirely new cities are being built at a pace we've not seen in history.

III. Urbanism Trends

A. Creation of New and Layered Cultures

1. Urban life is changing culture and social interaction

Urbanization has a lifting effect on an economy. There is a global correlation between a nation's economy and the urbanization status of the country. Furthermore, the Brookings study has noted that the growth of cities and industry in cities is leading to a growing middle class, particularly in the Global South.³⁵ Indian missiologist, J. N. Manokaran notes: "It is an important sociological change in modern India. This is a big challenge before the Church in India."³⁶ These changes are occurring all over Asia.

2. Identities are layered and produced

Ethnicity and geography once played an important role in our self-perceived identities. Our traditional ways of developing identities are being obscured in this new urban world. In a city like Jakarta, people come from more than three hundred distinct ethnic backgrounds and intermarry. The children are not only more urban than their parents but distinctive identity is more curated than inherited.

Identity struggles come with urbanization. Diversity and interaction means urbanites are constantly negotiating identity. A study of young urban Hui, a Muslim ethnic group from Western China, who have settled in China's Han majority cities illustrates this challenge. For the more urbanized Hui, their friendship network is more broad, whereas the traditional Hui maintain majority Hui networks.³⁷ The young, urban Hui also gravitate towards similar entertainment, media, and fashion as the young Han urbanites. However, the Hui still hold on to their cultural heritage.³⁸ The loss of the traditional ways mixed with the globalization of cultures and creation of sub-cultural identities make for identity confusion and perhaps layered identity.

³⁴ William McDonough, "How Cities Could Save Us," *Scientific American* 317, no. 1 (2017): 44, <https://doi.org/10.1038/scientificamerican0717-44>.

³⁵ "In technical terms, agglomeration externalities—the benefits that accrue to firms, workers, and local economies from clustering—now exist in many more parts of the world." Trujillo and Parilla, "Redefining Global Cities: The Seven Types of Global Metro Economies," 7.

³⁶ J. N. Manokaran, *Christ & Cities: Transformation of Urban Centres* (Chennai: Missional Educational Books, 2005), 1.

³⁷ Enoch J. Kim, "A New Entrance Gate in Urban Minorities: Chinese Muslim Minority, the Hui People Case," *Missiology: An International Review* 39, no. 3 (July 2011): 366, <https://doi.org/10.1177/009182961103900305>.

³⁸ Kim, 367.

B. Contested space

Cities have always been contested spaces. In the West, the conversation has revolved around socio-economic divisions and ethnic divisions. Books on urban living less often touch on these other realities of politics, religion, and corporations.

1. Political actors

In Western nations democracy and freedom are prioritized and taken for granted. In other parts of the world, sometimes the government holds all of the power. In other Asian cities, the government is so corrupt that corporate actors are the de facto municipal governance. Although citizens have a voice in urban affairs in some cities, in other cities the average citizen is silenced.

2. Religious actors

Cities, by nature, are places of religious plurality. A Pew Research study revealed that the most religiously diverse countries in the world are found in Asia, with Singapore topping the list.³⁹ Yet, in many cities religious matters are dictated either by religious authorities or political authorities. In the city of Tashkent, Uzbekistan, any fervent religious expression is quelled. Other cities have a majority religion that determines religious freedom for other religious groups. Even Singapore, with its veneer of religious freedom seeks to maintain harmony through government control.

3. Corporate actors

Corporations are becoming more influential on the global stage, which is impacting cities in a variety of ways. Most significantly, the privatization of municipal services is changing cities. And new developments are now handed over to big companies which creates cities of privatized and unintegrated islands.

The cities of China chose a path to building their cities that is unplanned and is fostering sprawl. China, as well as many other developing nations, has chosen to allow developers to develop large tracts of land.⁴⁰ It is a short cut to quick growth for a city, but it also brings many problems. When developers occupy large tracts of land, city governance takes a back seat to privatized islands in the city. Good street design, pedestrian and bicycle access, and integrated urbanism get side-lined. Left to themselves, developers will build for profit from their properties rather than for the city as a whole. In all of this the poor are overlooked and do not benefit from built housing or infrastructure that enables them to thrive in these cities. In fact, it appears that the government is bringing in the poor as a temporary source of labor, but they will not be given the opportunity to grow comfortable.⁴¹

³⁹ Alan Cooperman and Michael Lipka, "U.S. Doesn't Rank High in Religious Diversity," *Pew Research Center* (blog), April 4, 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/04/04/u-s-doesnt-rank-high-in-religious-diversity/>.

⁴⁰ Kuo, "Why China's Cities Need to Get Denser, Not Bigger."

⁴¹ Lily Kuo, "China's 'People-Centered' Urbanization Drive Will Leave over 200 Million Chinese without Benefits," *Quartz* (blog), March 17, 2014, <http://qz.com/188721/chinas-people-centered-urbanization-drive-will-leave-over-200-million-chinese-without-benefits/>.

Consumerism is about to scale up in unprecedented ways. A Brookings study has noted that India and China only account for 5 percent of middle class consumption today but that is expected to rise to 50 percent by the middle of this century.⁴²

C. Culmination of hyper-diversity

1. Cities thrive on diversity

Diversity has always been a key urban advantage. Even when we don't acknowledge it, diversity drives the economy. At the most basic level, density and high population increase the chances of diverse skills and talents. Cultural diversity adds another ingredient in the stew pot. It is essentially what Nebuchadnezzar was trying to leverage when he brought craftsmen from all the surrounding nations to Babylon. Now cities compete to attract top talent. Diversity doesn't only drive the economy but it also drives cultural production (which then further fuels the economy).

2. New age of hyper-diverse cities

One can travel to a major city anywhere in the world and likely encounter people from every continent. "We are seeing the emergence of super-diverse cities arising from massive migration flows... Migration is giving rise to new urban configurations of nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, age, gender, legal status, class and human capital. More than ever, minorities and immigrants are vocal and demand equal rights to be recognized and to take part in the collective life of the city."⁴³ Migrants make up one-third of cities like New York, London, and Sydney. Singapore is the most religiously diverse city in the world.⁴⁴ This hyper-diversity is changing our cities. Parthiban Muniandy studied migrant life in Kuala Lumpur. Himself a Malaysian, he expects to find migrants changed by their lives in the global city. He is more surprised to discover that the presence of migrants from many nations, languages, and cultures is also changing the cultural fabric of the city he grew up in. While the cultural texture becomes richer, there is less cohesion, making the city less friendly and accommodating.⁴⁵ Swing predicts increased tensions if steps aren't taken to accommodate diversity. There is very little political leadership helping us address the coming diversity. Failed integration is causing increasing violence around the world.⁴⁶

IV. Suggestions for the Church in Urban Asia

We are beginning to collect enough data at this point that we can gain a better understanding of the impacts of urbanization and urbanism. As the church, we must consider what this means for urban congregations as well as how we can engage the cities of our day with the gospel. Here are a few suggestions for Christian leaders in our cities to consider for the sake of flourishing churches that honor God.

⁴² Homi Kharas and Geoffrey Gertz, "The New Global Middle Class: A Crossover From Wests to East" (Brookings Institution Press, 2011), 8.

⁴³ Montira Horayangura Unakul, "Culture, Migration and Cities," in *Integrating Migrants in Cities* (World Urban Forum 9, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Emailed manuscript, 2018).

⁴⁴ "Integrating Migration into Cities" (World Urban Forum 9, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, February 9, 2018).

⁴⁵ Parthiban Muniandy, *Politics of the Temporary: An Ethnography of Migrant Life in Urban Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Strategic Info Research Development, 2015).

⁴⁶ Swing, "Megatrends for the 21st Century."

A. The Main Thing is Still the Main Thing

We live in a world where change is not only guaranteed but seems to be increasing, yet there are some constants that we must remain rooted in. As Christians, we are rooted in the Bible as God's Word and the gospel as our hope for real and lasting change. The church is given God's gift of kingdom community and is given a mandate to proclaim the gospel to everyone and to multiply both disciples and churches. This mandate is a constant that has been with us since Christ imparted the mandate to his disciples (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). This means simply that the church still needs to make old fashioned evangelism, discipleship and church planting the core of the missionary task.

There are many voices in the missions movement that appear to have moved away from these constants of the mission mandate either explicitly or implicitly. Explicitly, some who call themselves evangelicals have begun to recast basic doctrines like sin and salvation in terms of debt and redistribution.⁴⁷ Implicitly, important issues of social justice like poverty alleviation or human trafficking have consumed much of missiological discussion bandwidth. I believe this is rooted in churches that still hold the gospel as a core belief, but the teaching has been less gospel-centered or rooted in the Scriptures.

If the gospel is truly the only way we are transformed, then the only real hope for our cities is the dissemination of the gospel through our churches, urban and rural alike. It is still true that most people come to faith in Jesus through personal evangelism and grow in the local church. This means the local church needs to remain strong in the basics of evangelism, discipleship and church planting. More people coming to the cities means we need more evangelism, discipleship and church planting in our cities.

B. Urban Churches Need to Be Urban

Cities are places of intensity, specialization, and competition. The realities of city life change how we are wired which effects the ways we think, act, and interact with each other. This means there are elements of church life that must be different in cities than in small towns and villages. Many writers in urban missiology have observed that churches have tended to default to small town church practices. Our cities have small town people who would prefer small town churches. But if we want to reach urban people with the gospel, our churches will need to feel and be urban.

When people move to the city, they have to elevate their work. Cities are brimming with people loaded with talent and willing to work hard. If someone wants to make it in the city, they have to work harder and smarter to make it. These hardworking urbanites then go to churches where they see pastors and church members with a small-town mentality. This gives the impression that Christianity is old-fashioned or rural. There is something distinctly urban about churches thriving in the city. Urban churches will need to step up to an urban level of engagement with the congregation and the surrounding community. Here I will note three ways in which urban churches need to consider adjusting.

⁴⁷ The author observed a social media chat group amongst Filipino theologians where this idea was being promoted.

1. Relational Fragmentation

Cities are gathering points for those disconnected from traditional relational networks. This results in a social fragmentation that is challenging to reverse. Combined with developed technological habits, many people live in greater social isolation than at any time in history (even for those living in the midst of density).

Many of the existing CP methods used by Evangelical mission organizations rely heavily on solid relational networks among the focus population.⁴⁸ For example, several of the models rely on the initial person immediately gathering and sharing the gospel with others in their relational network, and they are encouraged to continue to do so until they see response to the gospel. One of the reasons I believe these methods are not working as well in cities is because the relational networks are not strong enough for the gospel to navigate smoothly through them. In a recent interview with a church planter in China, he discovered that news could travel faster over hundreds of miles in rural China, than it could travel a few blocks in the city of Chengdu. He concluded: “Social networks in the cities are fragmented.”⁴⁹ We must square up with this reality and adjust our methods.

When the natural relational networks of small town life break down in the city, people attempt to form new social networks. Anthropologists call these “fictive kinship networks.”⁵⁰ These networks are less organic, and formed more intentionally. Business leadership guru, Peter Drucker observes: “Human beings need community. If no communities are available for constructive ends, there will be destructive, murderous communities—the gangs of Victorian England, or the gangs that today threaten the very social fabric of the large, American city (and, increasingly, of every large city in the world).”⁵¹ In response to this, Drucker says, “The task today, therefore, is to create urban communities.”⁵² This observation is important for those of us wishing to see new churches formed in our ever-growing cities.

We will need to be more intentional with creating social interaction and relational connectivity. For this reason, Alan Hirsch suggests the use of “proximity spaces.” He explains: “A proximity space is not a church; rather, it involves the creation of places and/or events where Christians and not-yet-Christians can interact meaningfully with each other—effectively a missional space.”⁵³ In other words, many urban dwellers do not form relationships naturally; therefore, urban church planting requires an added step of creating new relationships with strangers.

⁴⁸ Steve Smith and Ying Kai, *T4T: A Discipleship Re-Revolution* (WIGTake Resources, LLC, 2011); Neil Cole, *Organic Church: Growing Faith Where Life Happens* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005); David Watson and Paul Watson, *Contagious Disciple Making: Leading Others on a Journey of Discovery* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2014).

⁴⁹ H P, Interview with Urban Church Planter in Asia, Skype, February 14, 2018.

⁵⁰ George F. Warshaw, ed., *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Anthropology* (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2004), 62.

⁵¹ Frances Hesselbein et al., eds., *The Community of the Future*, Drucker Foundation Future Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 3–4.

⁵² Hesselbein et al., 5.

⁵³ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 37.

If we rely only on relational access points, as house church networks do, we limit the points of access within a diverse population.⁵⁴ In some ways, urban culture is developing many parallels with postmodern culture. There is a strong desire for community, but societal norms and prevalent worldviews break down, rather than build up, community. This is an incredible opportunity for the church to introduce true community, built on the gospel. But it also means church planters have to be more involved in establishing healthy Christian community. There are some who advocate that relational church planting techniques or tactics are more organic,⁵⁵ but this does not account for our sinfulness. It is sometimes implied that, if we share the gospel and give new believers a Bible, they will automatically create healthy churches. This ignores our many sinful defaults, including patterns in our social interactions that need to be carefully uprooted in order to establish biblically healthy churches. Urban Christians will have to be more intentional in loving their neighbors and doing the long, hard work of making disciples.

2. Choice

While it is certainly true that we do not want to succumb to a consumeristic Christianity, we must acknowledge that urban dwellers are hard-wired to make choices in every aspect of life. The ubiquity of choices is one reason we need all kinds of church models in the city. We have a tendency to baptize one approach as the only one. If we put all of our eggs in the house church basket, we will miss the opportunity to impact a greater portion of the city. I have seen a church planting organization in the United States that defaults to promoting a megachurch model. Even though a church of 5000 sounds impressive, it still remains a small percentage of most cities, and megachurches tend to appeal only to a particular segment of the population. I've been told by a pastor in Malaysia that the only way to start a church is with stable families in a neighborhood, but that reduces our ministry focus to middle-class family-oriented suburbs. We need churches of all sizes and styles to reach a city.

There is a trend in the urban context that seems to favor models of church that include a larger gathering of believers. Tim Keller and Allen Thompson note: "Most people need to get to public worship or they lose momentum. Either you must have a fairly large house church with great worship or you need to get into a large worship gathering within a year. Bible studies or cell groups alone won't hold people."⁵⁶ Urban people typically choose a larger gathering over informal and smaller gatherings.

When we acknowledge people have choices, we must learn to hone our public worship and teaching to engage a population raised on perpetual stimulation. Eddie Gibbs suggests, "More people are lost from the church through sheer boredom than from any other cause."⁵⁷ This does

⁵⁴ Many involved in missions and church planting love the idea of house churches because of its potential for rapid reproduction. House churches require high-trust relational networks which are rarer in cities. As a church planter in San Francisco I saw several house churches hopeful about their potential to multiply all over the Bay Area. Each of these house churches rarely grew past the original core group and was less effective in reaching non-Christians than the more institutional churches in the city.

⁵⁵ Cole, *Organic Church*; Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church: Pursuing the Dream of Organic Christianity*, New edition (David C. Cook, 2012).

⁵⁶ Timothy J. Keller and J. Allen Thompson, *Church Planter Manual* (New York: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2002), 102.

⁵⁷ Eddie Gibbs, *Urban Church Growth* (Grove Books Ltd, 1977), 108.

not mean that we turn towards entertainment, but it does mean that we need to raise the level of our game. We need churches that are simultaneously biblically faithful and contextualized for our urban audiences. Urban congregations will need to draw on the full range of gifts and talents among their number to pursue excellence in all aspects of church life.

3. Reliance on Institutions

Urban life requires institutions. The increase of anonymity in the city and the decrease of trusted relational networks mean that city life cannot persist without established and organized institutions. Paul Hiebert and Eloise Meneses succinctly state the implications of this notion: “Urban life is impossible without [institutions]. Even the church in the city must be formally organized if it wishes to carry out large projects such as missions.”⁵⁸ I have found the importance of institutions to hold even more value in the Asian context. Someone starting something new without a formal organization is immediately considered suspicious. One pastor in an Asian global city recently told me he wished he was connected to a denomination because being associated with a recognized institution automatically gives credibility.⁵⁹

In cities, most people’s default is distrust. When I exit the train station in the thick of downtown in most any global city, I’m inundated with people trying to sell or promote something. My immediate answer is “no, thank you.” If someone is selling iPhones on a sidewalk blanket, my assumption is they are fake or stolen. If I want a legitimate iPhone sold legally, I will go to an authorized store. Most urban dwellers have the same skepticism with religious ideas peddled without any institutional connection. If these peddlers of religious ideas are legitimate, they will have a formal group and a place of gathering, goes the thinking. If they are connected in some way to other established churches, even better.

Institutionalization gives credibility, stability, and the ability for ongoing worldview development.⁶⁰ Not only are institutions critical in urban life,⁶¹ we must not forget the institutional nature of the church. Jonathan Leeman says that “‘building a people’ is by definition to institutionalize those people.”⁶² Church models that minimize or ignore the importance of

⁵⁸ Paul Hiebert and Eloise Meneses, *Incarnational Ministry: Planting Churches in Band, Tribal, Peasant, and Urban Societies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 283.

⁵⁹ Personal conversation with Nesan Benjamin, January 8, 2018.

⁶⁰ “Institutions play a very important role in the transmission of the world view which typifies, interprets and provides guidance regarding life’s questions. Indeed, transmission is based on the efficiency of the institution as a permanent solution to permanent problems of the social entity. The institution conveys its objectivated meanings as knowledge. Further, all transmission of institutional activity implies control and legitimation procedures. Often there is the emergence of full-time personnel. Indeed, a whole mental and physical apparatus may spring up which legitimizes a certain world view. Further, institutions often become reified, that is, they seem beyond human control and, hence, become alienated from human control.” Gregory J. Levine, “On the Geography of Religion,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 11, no. 4 (1986): 434.

⁶¹ “Here, specific individuals and institutions use the uncertainties incumbent in urban life and the need of most residents to have a sense of order as occasions to accumulate the material and symbolic resources that are used to exercise authority over how relations get made.” Simone, *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar*, 6.

⁶² Jonathan Leeman, *Political Church: The Local Assembly as Embassy of Christ’s Rule* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 25. Furthermore, he states, “It is a local church’s politically authorized corporate existence that constitutes a group of Christians as a visible embassy of Christ’s kingdom on earth and that, in turn, formally authorizes every individual within that assembly to represent the King’s name before the nations and their governors as an ambassador.” *Ibid.*, 24.

institutions in the city, like many house church planting models, as well as anarchic church planting models,⁶³ will struggle in the urban context. This does not mean house churches cannot thrive in a city, but it does mean they will do better if they are part of a formalized network of house churches (some cities may have security concerns about this, depending on context).⁶⁴ Institutionalization certainly has baggage (it can slow down church multiplication), but it also gives legitimacy and longevity to our message in the urban context.

C. R&D (with theological grounding)

Innovation and creativity are the urban advantage. We need fresh and creative approaches to church planting and discipling urban dwellers. Tim Keller says church planting can serve as the research and development (R&D) arm of the church. Tom Maluga also sees the connection between church planting and innovation: “New churches should be characterized by new ways of doing church.”⁶⁵ We need to create space for innovation and experimentation. Such innovation will involve risk, which means we need to give permission and create accountable community for experimentation. A church planting network in a city can be an asset to the creation of an innovative church planting mindset.

1. Complex Cities Need Complex Solutions

Urban societies are the most complex ones we have. “The more complex a system becomes, the greater will be the degree of autonomy achieved by its parts. This increases the possible numbers of sources of social change, which, in turn, increases the likelihood of greater complexity.”⁶⁶ To answer this complexity, organizations become more nuanced in order to encompass the increased heterogeneity, leading to a form of institutionalization. Durkheim famously described the division of labor common to urban societies.⁶⁷ Division of labor necessarily calls for mechanisms that bring order to this more complex collaboration of labor. Complexity in our cities means that we can’t tackle problems with simplistic solutions: “No matter how hard analysts and policymakers might try, practices of inhabiting the city are so diverse and change so quickly that they cannot easily be channeled into clearly defined uses of space and resources or patterns of social interchange.”⁶⁸

⁶³ Anarchic church planting is the term I give to those who avoid any attempt at introducing ecclesial structure and yet still acknowledge the presence of the church. Pete Ward articulates the closest thing to a theological defense of anarchic ecclesiology. He draws on Zygmunt Bauman’s cultural analysis in *Liquid Modernity*, to say that culture is moving from solid state social interaction to a fluid one. As such, church then takes place in the intersections of this fluid reality. A very simplified summary of Ward’s argument is that when believers interact, church takes place among them. There are others who see any official designation of church as detrimental to the community of Christians. Often these are ones who have been disgruntled with the established church (see Alan Jamieson’s analysis). For further reading, see: Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Carlisle Cumbria ; Peabody, MA: Paternoster Press; Hendrickson Publishers, 2002); Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys Beyond the Churches* (London: SPCK, 2002).

⁶⁴ Most urban house church networks I know of depend on a centralized structure which often includes a regular larger gathering and often a full time pastor, trainer, or leader.

⁶⁵ Tom Maluga, “Multiplying Churches to Take Cities for Christ,” in *A Heart for the City: Effective Ministries to the Urban Community*, ed. John Fuder (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 183.

⁶⁶ Steven Vago, *Social Change*, 4th ed. (Prentice Hall, 1998), 70.

⁶⁷ Vago, 70.

⁶⁸ Simone, *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar*, 3.

Experimentation is needed in cities- “Cities were and are places full of experiments, of different ways of being with people, spaces, and things.”⁶⁹

2. Innovation is Needed with Unreached Segments and Places

In many Asian cities the Christian population is often limited to certain population segments of the city. In urban Southeast Asia, the church is mostly middle-class. This was not intentional, but rather the result of methods that more easily worked in a middle-class context. In our cities of increasing diversity, our churches remain somewhat homogenous. It is vital for the church to recognize who else is in the city and innovate ways to reach them.

Experimentation is needed to forge new gatherings that will become churches. Stores that make their products visibly accessible are more inviting than those that require effort to see the products. We’ve done the same with our churches, people have to step into a community that feels strange and awkward to newcomers. We need to experiment with ways of gathering that give those interested in Christianity an opportunity to check things out in a more casual and familiar manner. There is a need for “in-between” space for community: “urban space is hollowed out and dislocated in such a way as to take apart the physical environments through which different kinds of people might come to know each other. Still, there remain prolific in-between spaces.”⁷⁰

D. Reterretorialization- Place, Space, and Built Environment

The importance of place has been undervalued by evangelicals (particularly in the West) since World War II. In the United States, this occurred during a time of urban sprawl into the cheapest land available which included creating an automobile-dependent lifestyle. It became a time of extreme individualism which led to building homes that had little connectivity to the rest of the town or city.⁷¹ What mattered was building a private kingdom with maximum square footage at minimal cost. Churches followed suit, building large, temporary structures on the cheapest land surrounded by excessive parking lots. This shift sent a subtle message that place was not as important as price and convenience. The result was a devaluing of place.

The church did not always lack an appreciation for place. A walk around old downtowns reveals beautiful church structures built in key locations. These were centrally located places that told of a legacy of the church in the city, and places that reminded the public of Christian faith. Similarly, in today’s cities we need church meeting places that are centrally located, accessible, and provide a symbolic presence in the city.⁷²

Evangelical theology has underemphasized place. When Jesus shifted worship away from the physical temple, we came to assume that place was unimportant. It is not that the temple was desacralized, but that all the earth is sacred space. We are inherently spatial beings bearing the image of God. As disciples of Jesus we are promised a special presence of God (Matt 28:20) and

⁶⁹ Simone, 9.

⁷⁰ Simone, 10.

⁷¹ Joel Kotkin, *The City: A Global History* (New York: Modern Library, 2005), 117–18.

⁷² This does not necessarily mean we need to buy expensive buildings in the city centers, but it does mean we need to find ways to be present in those places.

when we gather as the church we do so in a physical place.⁷³ In an urban context, having a gathering place requires increased intentionality, because every aspect of life requires increased intentionality.

As Paul went to new cities to plant churches in Acts, he looked for public religious gatherings as a starting point for proclaiming the gospel. Most often he went to the synagogue first, a place set aside for the gathering of Jews for worship (Acts 14:1; 17:1, 10; 18:4, 19). In Philippi, Paul intentionally went to the riverside because he knew it was “a place of prayer” (Acts 16:13, ESV). In Ephesus, Paul established a regular gathering place in the hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9). We also know of regular meetings in various homes in Rome. These gatherings became regular enough for Paul, who had not yet been to Rome, to identify the homes that hosted the gathered church (Rom. 16:5a, 10b, 11b, 14, 15).⁷⁴ Although it is not explicitly stated, place is implicit in his church planting methodology.

Commercial real estate agents all know the importance of “location, location, location.” When a new commercial center is being built that shows promise, Starbucks and McDonalds establish themselves on prominent street corners even before the surrounding development is finished. They understand something the church has been slow to understand—the importance of location. They know that being readily visible and accessible gives them a competitive edge. By contrast, the church has defaulted to finding the cheapest possible places to meet. This often means churches meet in locations far from public transportation or key nodes of the city. This also means these meeting places are difficult to find. I heard from one individual who wanted to visit a church that he was embarrassed because he didn’t have a car (his assumption was based on the out-of-the-way location of churches), and therefore opted not to go. We need meeting places that can be easily reached and that send a message that they want visitors.

Anonymity is a part of urban life and it impacts how urban dwellers perceive and use space/place. In fact, Eric Jacobson defines a city in this way: “A city is a place where it is acceptable to be a stranger.”⁷⁵ Many come to the city as individuals and many leave other locations for some separation from social pressures. City life further breaks up strong relational cohesion through separated work environments, rigid time demands, and increased specialized interests. More than 45% of the households in Tokyo are single adult households.⁷⁶ This trend appears to be on the rise globally. Church methods that rely on social networks to grow and add to their number, will miss out on this growing percentage of the population. Centralized places that are welcoming places for strangers can be an effective way to reach these increasingly isolated urban dwellers.

⁷³ The length of this work does not permit a longer treatment of the theology of place. For more on this see chapter 14 in my book: Michael D. Crane, *Sowing Seeds of Change: Cultivating Transformation in the City* (Portland, OR: Urban Loft Publishers, 2015), 254–56.

⁷⁴ Reta Halteman Finger, *Paul and the Roman House Churches: A Simulation* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1993), 31–32.

⁷⁵ Eric O. Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), 139.

⁷⁶ “Isolation Factor Rising in Japan,” *The Japan Times*, April 19, 2014, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2014/04/19/editorials/isolation-factor-rising-in-japan/>.

Not long ago someone who had just been in the overwhelmingly Buddhist city of Bangkok told me about their experience on a boat traveling the city's extensive canals. He noticed the frequency of mosques and, knowing that Muslims were a small minority in that city, asked about their presence. The boat navigator told him there was a goal to build mosques every few kilometers along the canals in order to provide a visible community center of Muslims in the city no matter where they were. These visible structures become symbolic of a Muslim community in that city.⁷⁷ Abdoumalik Simone notes a similar trend in Jakarta, one of the world's largest cities. Mosques are being built in every neighborhood as a means to accessibility. Simone further adds that this adds to civic involvement because mosques become places for localized conversations. "As more people are attending these discussions, the importance of mosques as sites of information exchange and for shaping public opinion grows."⁷⁸ By the same token, it is rare to come across church structures, and one therefore gets the impression that Christianity is not established in that city. The symbolic power of place is a form of proclamation, albeit a subtle one.

In today's world, space is not limited to geography and square feet, but it has come to include virtual space. As our family was celebrating my youngest son's birthday, we wanted to go for some ice cream. We were in another part of the city and did not know where to go. I did what most any urban dweller would do and used my smartphone to locate the closest place to buy ice cream. Watching my son smile as he went to work on his mint chocolate chip ice cream came as a result of the ice cream shop having an online presence. The same is true with churches. Cities are increasingly transient. If people are interested in finding a church, they will google it. An urban church without an internet footprint is nothing more than a small-town church in a city. We need to maximize visibility, virtual and physical, so we can maximize opportunities to proclaim the gospel to the urban masses.

E. Diverse Church Models to Reach Urban Diversity

Cities display the most human diversity in terms of talent, ethnicity, socio-economic status, and interests. Some say heterogeneity defines the city.⁷⁹ Current trends of urbanization and global migration challenge approaches that rely too heavily on homogeneity and stability. In most global cities it is becoming less common to meet locals that have lived in that city for life. Urban-to-urban migration is a rising trend. People are more mobile than ever before and this impacts the feeling of familiarity of people in a city. Eric Jacobson even defines the city as a place where meeting a stranger is normal.⁸⁰ Urban historian Lewis Mumford tells us that cities have grown to rely on diversity in order to thrive.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Adis Idris Raksamani, "Multicultural Aspects of the Mosques in Bangkok," *Manusya: Journal of Humanities*, no. 16 (2008): 114.

⁷⁸ Simone, *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar*, 73.

⁷⁹ Alan S. Berger, *The City: Urban Communities and Their Problems* (Dubuque, IA: Wm C Brown Publishers, 1978), 158.

⁸⁰ Jacobsen, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*, 139.

⁸¹ Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*. (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1961), 140.

When missions turned to focus entirely on ethnolinguistic people groups, it inherently shifted focus away from cities. Edward Said famously said: “No one today is purely one thing.”⁸² This is particularly true in the city. Anthropologist and missiologist Hiebert notes the fluid nature of identities in the urban context: “Generally speaking, urban life erodes ethnic loyalties over the generations and class identities grow stronger. This is true even in caste-based societies like India. Caste boundaries are more fuzzy and fluid in cities than they are in villages.”⁸³ Cities become cultural melting pots to the point that new ethnic identities form.⁸⁴ More commonly, people organize themselves along different rallying points; e.g., religion, vocation, subculture, and geography. While mission organizations tend to focus on people group counts in cities, the reality is that urban dwellers take on layered and fluid identity as necessitated by urban-life circumstances.

The diversity of the city has been a challenge to our small-town approaches to church planting and missions. The challenge of urban diversity has especially been a challenge for those with a people group strategy.⁸⁵ Cities force us out of our homogenous unit comfort zones so we can innovate churches that more accurately reflect the diversity of the city. Mac Pier challenges the church to collaborate with each other in order to engage cities: “Most of the churches in our urban centers are tribal—either by ethnicity, economic class, or denomination...The greatest barrier to spiritual impact is the enormous trust deficit between diverse Christian groups. We can only love those we know.”⁸⁶ This kind of division is often subtle, but it limits the kind of impact we can have on the city.

The diversity of the city forces us to consider diverse methods and strategies. Due to this diversity, “no single set of principles can be formulated.”⁸⁷ There seems to be a correlation between urban churches that display the most diversity and their vibrancy.⁸⁸ It takes all kinds of churches to reach a city. This means we need to encourage healthy church planting principles in all segments of the city.

We need many kinds of churches to match the diversity of our cities. A number of years ago, Francis DuBose described the importance of a wide variety of churches, including: cathedral churches, city center churches, uptown churches, people’s churches, university churches, large neighborhood churches, small neighborhood churches, storefront churches, suburban churches, and language churches.⁸⁹ To this list we can add others like house churches, homeless churches, and multicultural churches. This not an effort at a comprehensive list of urban churches; rather, it intends to pry open the lid to the variety of churches needed to engage all segments of a city.

⁸² Dale T. Irvin, “The Church, the Urban, and the Global: Mission in an Age of Global Cities,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 33, no. 4 (October 2009): 180.

⁸³ Hiebert and Meneses, *Incarnational Ministry*, 301.

⁸⁴ In Jakarta, it is often stated that the original people are called the Batavia people. In reality, however, the Batavia people are those who came to the city (with the old Dutch name of Batavia) and intermarried to the point that any other ethnic heritage was diluted. Craig A. Lockard, “Patterns of Social Development in Modern Southeast Asian Cities,” *Journal of Urban History* 5, no. 1 (1978): 46.

⁸⁵ When a missionary is focused primarily on a people group rather than the city, they are often pushed to the countryside to find the people group in its homogeneous setting.

⁸⁶ Mac Pier, *Spiritual Leadership in the Global City* (Birmingham, AL: New Hope Publishers, 2008), 40.

⁸⁷ Hiebert and Meneses, *Incarnational Ministry*, 327.

⁸⁸ Keller and Thompson, *Church Planter Manual*, 87.

⁸⁹ Francis M. DuBose, *How Churches Grow in an Urban World* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1978), 61–69.

Taylor Field, who for 30 years has lead Graffiti, a ministry in New York City to the down and out, tells of trying to integrate his small church of recovering drug addicts and homeless into an established neighborhood church. The experiment failed miserably as his congregation lost the ability to be transparent about their issues with the larger group.⁹⁰ Graffiti returned as a church that ministered especially to the marginalized. Everyone needs a church community that feels like family.

F. Two Billion Urban Poor: Too Many to Ignore

Global statistics on urban poverty demand a response from the church. Two out of seven people in the world are counted among the urban poor.⁹¹ More than half of the world's urban population lives in poverty. Moreover, there are an estimated one billion urban slum dwellers (those living in informal settlements) in the world, and the numbers are projected to increase to 1.3 billion by 2020.⁹² These numbers are not expected to slow down. This calls for a two-fold response.

First, this sizeable demographic deserves missiological attention. Viv Grigg does not mince words in calling missiology to notice the urban poor: "The greatest mission surge in history has entirely missed the greatest migration in history, the migration of Third World rural peasants to great mega-cities."⁹³ When Grigg went to Manila to work with university students, he observed the church reaching the middle class and ignoring the slums. Unfortunately, throughout much of Asia, the church has done little to reach the urban poor, particularly those living in informal settlements.⁹⁴ The church has sometimes engaged in drop-in charity work, but not the core task of evangelism, discipleship and church planting. To do this well, long-term presence is essential.⁹⁵

Second, the urban poor are the most vulnerable to exploitation and systemic injustice. The rest of the city has responded to the urban poor by using them for their labor and then creating separation from them. It is incumbent on the church to be the first to love and serve the urban poor and seek their flourishing. This requires that the church take a proactive approach to knowing the challenges of the poor in their city and, more importantly, knowing the poor personally. The church must take steps to engage this burgeoning under-reached population segment in our cities.

⁹⁰ Taylor Field and Jo Kadlecsek, *A Church Called Graffiti: Finding Grace on the Lower East Side* (Nashville TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 39.

⁹¹ Todd M. Johnson and Peter F. Crossing, "Status of Global Mission, 2013, in the Context of AD 1800-2025," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 37, no. 1 (January 2013): 33.

⁹² Jo Beall and Sean Fox, *Cities and Development* (London; New York: Routledge, 2009), 27, 61.

⁹³ Viv Grigg, "Sorry! The Frontier Moved," in *Planting and Growing Urban Churches: From Dream to Reality*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 151.

⁹⁴ Paul Ebenezer, "Slum and Kingdom Movements: Challenges and Approaches," *Hindustan Evangelical Review* 7 (2014 2013): 98.

⁹⁵ Ebenezer, 110; Viv Grigg, *Cry of the Urban Poor: Reaching the Slums of Today's Megacities* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic and World Vision, 2004); Ash Barker, *Slum Life Rising: How to Enflesh Hope within a New Urban World* (Dandenong, Australia: UNOH Publishing, 2012).

G. Multiplying Christian Leaders for an Urban Future

We are facing a dearth of leadership in our churches (if not in our cities as a whole). Many of the leaders we do have, often lack the courage and conviction to lead well.⁹⁶ Some resort to small town patriarchal leadership styles and others are bullied by church members who see themselves as the power-holders in the church. If we want urban churches to flourish and perpetuate, we must take seriously the work of developing leaders of every generation. In our churches we tend to teach people how to be good church members rather than leaders. We are then shocked by the lack of leaders. Two questions concern us here. What kind of leaders do we need in our urban churches? How do we develop more leaders?

1. Professionals Teaching Professionals: Division of Labor

The very nature of the city implies the shift from everyone being a subsistence farmer, to the ability to develop vocational specialties. In other words, the social interaction of farmers spurred innovative technologies that allowed farmers to produce a surplus. This surplus permitted further innovation and specialization that coincided with the building of towns.⁹⁷ Ever since the first towns became points of trade, labor has become more and more specialized and divided.⁹⁸ As I write this, I'm waiting to visit a dental crown specialist after visiting a root canal specialist. When I was a kid, we just went to the dentist for everything. In small towns, dentists still tend to do everything. There is far less division of labor in rural settings.

Urban dwellers demand a higher level of sophistication. We can see evidence of this in the kinds of restaurants found in small towns compared with large metropolitan areas. This demand extends into spiritual matters. Hiebert and Meneses observed: "Too often we try to plant country churches in urban areas, and we don't know why we fail."⁹⁹ He states further:

Today, missions around the world are focusing on planting urban churches, but too often they start peasant-style churches and, therefore, are unable to reach city folk. Many church planters misunderstand and fear urban life. They succeed best in the suburbs because these maintain some rural characteristics.¹⁰⁰

Many of the most well-known preachers and worship music tend to derive from larger cities.¹⁰¹ There is something about the city that drives up the standards of communication and delivery. Urban pastors are expected to be able to communicate with businessmen and women, doctors, and lawyers. This means that communication delivery needs to be clear, concise, and winsome.

⁹⁶ J. N. Manokaran, *Christ and Missional Leaders* (Chennai: Missional Educational Books, 2007), 15–16.

⁹⁷ John Rennie Short, *The Urban Order: An Introduction to Urban Geography* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996), 14–15; Jane Jacobs, *The Economy of Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1970).

⁹⁸ Alexander Moore, *Cultural Anthropology: The Field Study of Human Beings* (San Diego, CA: Collegiate Press, 1998), 347.

⁹⁹ Hiebert and Meneses, *Incarnational Ministry*, 257.

¹⁰⁰ Hiebert and Meneses, 325.

¹⁰¹ Historical examples of great preachers are John Chrysostom in Constantinople, Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, and Charles Spurgeon in London. In each case, these men known for their preaching ability started in smaller towns and were called to their respective larger cities. Modern day examples of well-known preachers based in cities include: Tim Keller in New York, John McArthur and Rick Warren in the LA area, Charles and Andy Stanley in Atlanta. Hillsong in Sydney and Brooklyn Tabernacle in New York have had significant influence on congregational worship.

This also means the content needs to be intellectually rigorous for a diverse audience.¹⁰² Cities amplify the need to consider how each believer uses his or her gifts and talents for ministry because of the demands for specialization. This makes reproducibility a challenge, but not a challenge without solutions. We do need rigorous training for urban pastors who are equipped and competent to teach God's Word to a diverse and intellectual congregation.¹⁰³ Other gifts need to be developed uniquely as well. Leaders of growing urban churches have discovered the traditional "each one reach one" does not work in the city. Because of the diversity in a city, specialization is required in evangelism as well. Some churches have seen better results from identifying those with evangelistic gifts and equipping them to thrive.¹⁰⁴ This does not absolve all believers from proactively sharing the gospel, but it recognizes the giftedness of some who are particularly wired towards evangelism.

2. Developing More Leaders Well

In times past, many seminaries were built further away from civilization to give students an undistracted, nearly monastic type of theological training. This model of seminary education has its merits, but it also has its limitations. The seminaries, being set off from our bigger cities in particular, had a tendency to train pastors for small town churches. Pastors, armed with a master's degree would go to a small-town church as the most educated man in town. But they go to the cities ill-equipped to pastor in the city.

The natural solution is to begin developing leaders in our growing cities. We need urban-based theological training that will equip leaders to pastor in our complex cities. Experience-based learning can put students into real city ministry contexts while developing a theological framework to respond to the many and complex issues faced by urban dwellers. Being based in the city also gives students direct interface with the diversity of the city.

As we seek to see all segments of a city reached, we must recognize the importance of training leaders outside of the academic setting. If we are serious about reaching the urban poor and those living in informal settlements, we must reflect on ways to raise up pastors from among the urban poor. Similarly, with the numbers of migrant workers and refugees traversing our cities, we must readily train pastors and leaders outside of our typical times and places of training.¹⁰⁵ For example, migrant workers have limited openings in their schedules due to demanding work hours. This requires that we adjust to their schedules.

¹⁰² Keith Hinton observes this trend in Singapore and Taipei: "Again, growing churches tend to have good preachers, and the pastor dominates the pulpit. I found in Singapore, as Swanson observed in Taiwan, that lay preaching tends to retard growth of the church preachers. Communication is a skill requiring training and a high level of expertise. Preaching is a profession!" Keith Hinton, *Growing Churches Singapore Style Ministry in an Urban Context* (O M F Books, 1985), 147.

¹⁰³ "When training Christian leaders for ministry in the city, the church is going to have to abandon assembly-line, denomination-oriented, systems-associated methods." Edgar J. Elliston and J. Timothy Kauffman, *Developing Leaders for Urban Ministries*, American University Studies: Theology and Religion, VII (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 135.

¹⁰⁴ Keller and Thompson, *Church Planter Manual*, 15; Hiebert and Meneses, *Incarnational Ministry*, 411.

¹⁰⁵ Michael D. Crane, "Equipping the Transient for Ministry in a Global City," *The New Urban World Journal* 3, no. 1 (May 2014): 7–15.

If we want to see urban churches flourish, we must raise up more leaders in our cities and do so in ways that teach them to minister to our growing and complex communities.

H. Networked Locally and Globally

Nearly every book written on urban missions has stressed the need for churches and ministries to work collectively to engage a city. This has been one of the biggest barriers to the advance of the kingdom in our cities. Churches too often operate in isolation and end up showing the city how disunified the church is, instead of demonstrating the bonding together fomented by the Holy Spirit. Even the most mega of the megachurches cannot reach a city on its own. We must recognize that. Collectively, we have the God-given resources, expertise, and laborers to bring radical change in our cities, if we'll prioritize God and his kingdom over our individual churches and ministries.

It is even more challenging in cities. We need a pooling together of resources, prayer, and support to help start flourishing, reproducing churches. Noel Castellanos, who has been involved in urban ministry as a pastor and now as the CEO of Christian Community Development Association (CCDA), urges unity among Christians engaging cities: "It will take the entire body of Christ working together to see the gospel truly impact our city."¹⁰⁶ Churches contextually planted in different segments of the city will reach different people and bless the city in unique ways.

The danger of over-emphasizing unity is that we can push for a superficial show of unity that has abandoned the true source of transformation, the saving work of Christ. Theological conviction must shape all of our collaboration. The letters of Paul are instructive here. His letters address a variety of problems plaguing the church and creating disunity. In every instance he goes back to the gospel and makes a theological case for our unity. I submit we need to develop networks, both local and transnational, that enable greater collaboration. Furthermore, we need to work towards an ecosystem, where the various churches and ministries of a city are working in concert to seek the welfare of the city and make the gospel known to all of its inhabitants.

1. Networking to Reach Our Cities

New churches in cities can be validated by a more formal network that approves new churches. Since city people are conditioned to be more guarded and less trusting, it helps to have an established network that says "this guy is connected to something bigger and has been vetted by the group." A number of networks are emerging in different cities and some are globally networked (e.g., Acts 29 or Redeemer City to City). Networks break up the isolation experienced by so many pastors in a city and challenges members of the network to grow in different aspects of ministry.

Transnational networks are increasingly playing a role in reaching cities. Many urbanists claim that global cities share more in common with each other than they do with those in their own surrounding small towns. It makes sense then that a church planting network formed in New

¹⁰⁶ Noel Castellanos, "Working Together to Restore Our Communities: Networking and Collaboration," in *A Heart for the Community: New Models for Urban and Suburban Ministry* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 51.

York might be instrumental in planting churches in global cities throughout the world. We also must recognize that urban professionals are more mobile than ever, going from city to city. Networks can facilitate transition so they can step into ministry in the next city.

2. Ecosystem

Cities are ecosystems. There was a time when cities were considered merely as a delivery of services and structures sustained by technology. In the 1950s and 60s, Jane Jacobs and Christopher Alexander began to speak of cities in terms of systems and organisms.¹⁰⁷ Theologically, cities take on the collective properties of its inhabitants. The sinfulness of humanity then means our cities harbor systemic evil that pervades the ecosystem. In order for the church to seek the welfare of the city (Jer. 29:7), ecosystem thinking is needed.¹⁰⁸ Networks are good and necessary to achieve narrower aims, but are not capable of city-scale transformation. For example, the city of Medan, Indonesia has church steeples that dot the skyline of the city. Through denominational networks, churches were started and many now call themselves Christian. Nevertheless, poverty is rife, alcoholism is ubiquitous, and corruption cripples the city. It is a city that needs a gospel-centered ecosystem that can tackle the many aspects of life that are holding limiting whole city change. An ecosystem is composed of a variety of networks and other entities that are committed to the welfare of the city. A healthy gospel ecosystem is built on a common theological vision and flourishing churches (see Appendix B a graphic of a canopy ecosystem).¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

For those of us living in urban Asia, the world is changing all around us. Asian cities are growing in size, in population, in diversity, in economic output, and global influence. Asian cities are also destined to be pushed to the limits by urban migration and overwhelmed by strains on infrastructure and governance. These same cities have strained ethnic/religious/political tensions and are teeming with broken and hurting masses. The church must respond innovatively and with deep conviction that only the gospel can reorient a city away from being another Babylon and “forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Heb. 11:10). To do this we must know our cities and love our cities. As Christians, loving our cities means being a voice for those without a voice, being family to those without families, and announcing the truth of the gospel in every alley and avenue and every park and promenade.

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¹⁰⁸ Timothy J. Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 375; Howard A. Snyder, *Small Voice, Big City: The Challenge of Urban Mission* (Skyforest, CA: Urban Loft Publishers, 2016), 45.

¹⁰⁹ Crane, *Sowing Seeds of Change*.

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Appendix A: Asian Cities Among the 100 Largest Cities of the World¹¹⁰

Below are the urban areas in the world ranked by the most populated.

"**Urban Area**" is defined as a continuous urban area or a combination of urban areas which statistically can be considered as a single labor market.

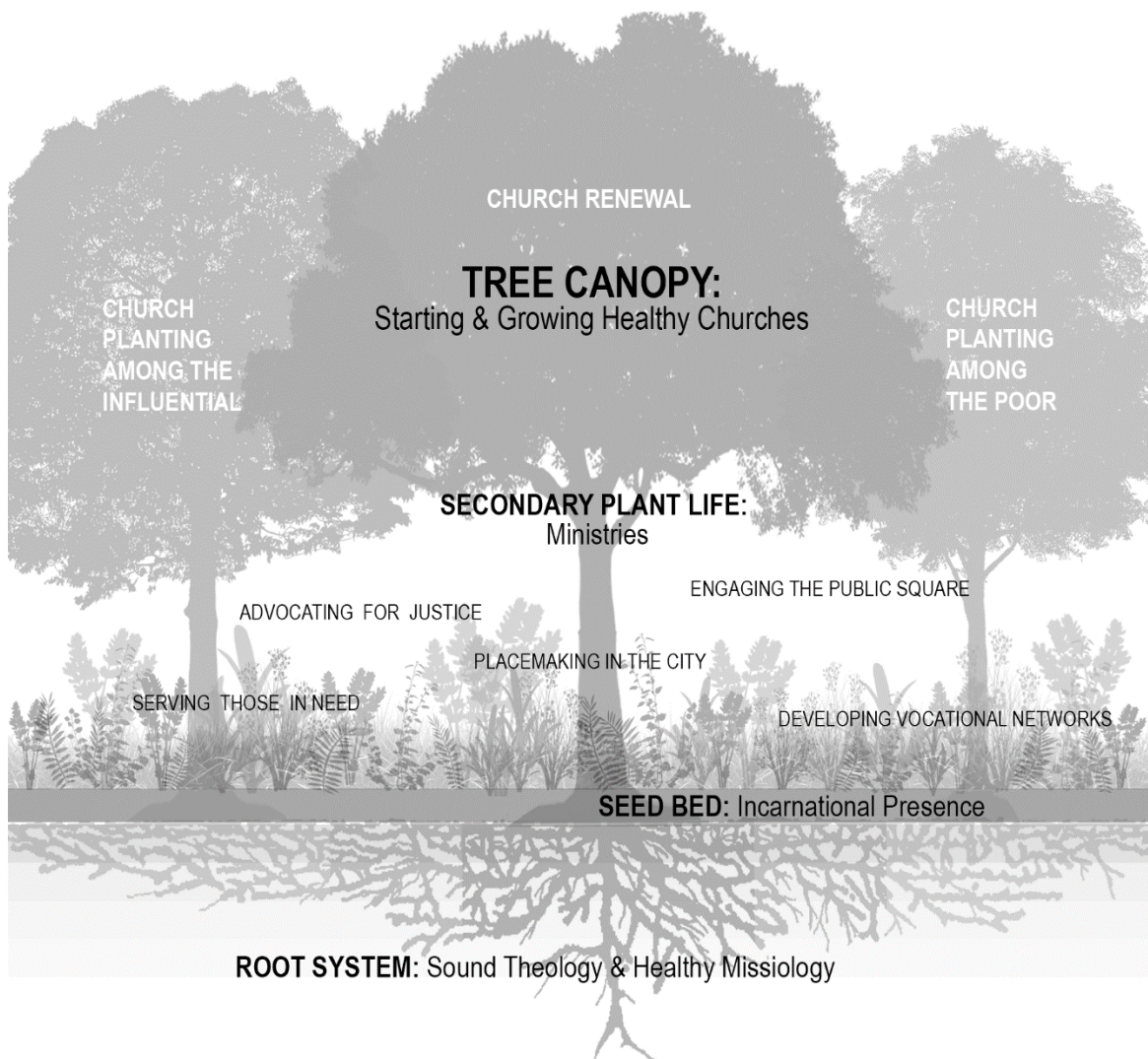
An alternative list could adopt a different definition of "city" and rank "**cities proper**" which are cities with an administratively recognized urban status. However, these might stretch beyond the metropolitan area and include rural areas.

Rank	Urban Area	Population Estimate (2015)	Country	Land Area: Km2
1	Tokyo-Yokohama	37,843,000	Japan	8,547
2	Jakarta	30,539,000	Indonesia	3,225
3	Delhi, DL-UP-HR	24,998,000	India	2,072
4	Manila	24,123,000	Philippines	1,580
5	Seoul-Incheon	23,480,000	South Korea	2,266
6	Shanghai, SHG-JS-ZJ	23,416,000	China	3,820
7	Karachi	22,123,000	Pakistan	945
8	Beijing, BJ	21,009,000	China	3,820
10	Guangzhou-Foshan, GD	20,597,000	China	3,432
13	Mumbai, MH	17,712,000	India	546
14	Osaka-Kobe-Kyoto	17,444,000	Japan	3,212
16	Dhaka	15,669,000	Bangladesh	360
19	Bangkok	14,998,000	Thailand	2,590
20	Kolkata, WB	14,667,000	India	1,204
22	Tehran	13,532,000	Iran	1,489
23	Istanbul	13,287,000	Turkey	1,360
25	Shenzhen, GD	12,084,000	China	1,748
28	Tianjin, TJ	10,920,000	China	2,007
31	Chengdu, SC	10,376,000	China	1,541
33	Nagoya	10,177,000	Japan	3,885
34	Lahore	10,052,000	Pakistan	790
35	Bangalore, KA	9,807,000	India	1,166
36	Chennai, TN	9,714,000	India	971
39	Ho Chi Minh City	8,957,000	Viet Nam	1,489
40	Hyderabad, AP	8,754,000	India	1,230
41	Dongguan, GD	8,442,000	China	1,619
43	Wuhan, HUB	7,509,000	China	1,166
44	Taipei	7,438,000	China: Taiwan	1,140
45	Hangzhou, ZJ	7,275,000	China	1,217

¹¹⁰ Asian cities extracted from "Largest Cities in the World (2015) - Worldometers."

Rank	Urban Area	Population Estimate (2015)	Country	Land Area: Km2
46	Hong Kong	7,246,000	China: Hong Kong SAR	275
47	Chongqing, CQ	7,217,000	China	932
48	Ahmadabad, GJ	7,186,000	India	350
49	Kuala Lumpur	7,088,000	Malaysia	1,943
50	Quanzhou, FJ	6,710,000	China	1,528
52	Baghdad	6,625,000	Iraq	673
57	Nanjing, JS	6,155,000	China	1,269
58	Shenyang, LN	6,078,000	China	1,010
59	Xi'an, SAA	5,977,000	China	932
62	Qingdao, SD	5,816,000	China	1,489
65	Bandung	5,695,000	Indonesia	466
66	Riyadh	5,666,000	Saudi Arabia	1,502
67	Pune, MH	5,631,000	India	479
68	Singapore	5,624,000	Singapore	518
70	Surat, GJ	5,447,000	India	233
72	Suzhou, JS	5,246,000	China	1,127
76	Zhengzhou, HEN	4,942,000	China	829
78	Surabaya	4,881,000	Indonesia	673
79	Harbin, HL	4,815,000	China	570
80	Yangon	4,800,000	Myanmar	544
85	Kabul	4,635,000	Afghanistan	259
87	Ankara	4,538,000	Turkey	660
90	Xiamen, FJ	4,420,000	China	583
91	Kuwait	4,283,000	Kuwait	712
94	Dalian, LN	4,183,000	China	777
95	Accra	4,145,000	Ghana	971
99	Fuzhou, FJ	3,962,000	China	440
100	Medan	3,942,000	Indonesia	479

CANOPY ECOSYSTEM APPROACH TO URBAN TRANSFORMATION



ROOT SYSTEM → SEED BED → TREE CANOPY → SECONDARY PLANT LIFE → THRIVING CANOPY ECOSYSTEM

¹¹¹ Crane, *Sowing Seeds of Change*.