
Sorry! The Frontier Moved

Viv Grigg

It was a Marxist city of ten million. Two and a half million lived in the *bustees* (slums). Most of the middle class families are poorer than the street people of Los Angeles. Sixty-six percent live one family per room. And the church? In the *bustees* there are only two house churches. Some of the middle class families from the *bustees* are involved in the fifty-eight middle class churches. But the poor of the slums, the 500,000 poor in the refugee camps, the 200,000 poor on the streets¹, had never known a poor people's movement or their own churches. No one had ever proclaimed Jesus to them. No holy man had ever lived among them to show them Jesus in word and deed, in acts of mercy and deeds of power.

It was a joy to find such a man. The government had imprisoned him for working with the poor. He clearly couldn't face talking about it. Quietly, he had gone back to the ragged, wretched orphans, widows and beggars whom he loved and for whom he labored. He was a man who took Jesus' pattern of ministry to the poor seriously.

In my book, *Companion to the Poor*, a theology and praxis was developed for establishing the Kingdom in the slums, in a Catholic-animistic setting. In the process of preparing teams for other Asian mega-cities, it seemed good for me to find out if the principles and practice developed in the slums of Manila were equally valid elsewhere, to find out if anyone in Asia had been able to generate a movement of fellowships among the

urban poor.

This is a report on those two years of walking the slums of the great cities of Asia, looking for God among the poor, seeking to know how the great mission surge of the last decades had established the church among the urban poor.

The sad report is that after thorough research in eight cities, I found only two such embryo movements. The conclusion: 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.

I wanted to find answers to two major questions:

1. Where are the men and women who, like Jesus, choose to live as poor among the poor, establishing and tending newly formed churches day and night?

2. Is the incarnational approach necessary to establish the Kingdom among the poor? Is it the wisest approach?

Assumptions

Two assumptions in mission seem self-evident. The first is that Jesus is our model for mission. Did he not say "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (John 20:21)? And did not his first declaration of his own great commission tell us:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18).

Did he not with these words model the gospel as *primarily* good news for the poor? Did he not focus

his ministry to the poor, declaring that the ministry to the poor is holistic, involving preaching, healing, deliverance, justice and doing good deeds, though initiated by proclamation (and reception) of the Kingdom?

The second assumption is pragmatic missionary strategizing:

1. Urban is the direction of history.
2. The poor are the most responsive target group according both to Jesus' teaching and to missions history, research and sociological analysis (McGavran 1980:269-294).

3. The migrant poor are the largest, most responsive group on earth today. I have found this to be true of Muslims in Karachi, Hindus in Calcutta, Buddhists in Thailand and



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Catholics in Manila. All are in a state of rapid socio-economic and worldview change, and are hungry for the reality of a new relationship to a god.

Jesus commands a focus not so much on the last, unreached, unresponsive people groups in the world but on those major unreached or partially reached groups that are responsive. The first five years following a person or family's migration is the time of greatest responsiveness to the gospel, for peoples and for individuals. Roger Greenway speaks of his conversion to ministry to the urban poor with the phrase: "If the streets are paved, move on." Jimmy Maroney, speaking of his experiences strategizing for church-planting in Nairobi, tells us:

"Finally, a national pastor pointed out to me that they [new migrants] were the most responsive to the gospel. In fact they proved to be more responsive to the gospel in the city than back in their villages. The traditional guardians of custom and culture do not exist in the city. People away from home are 'off balance' and willing to listen to what they considered strange back home. *I would certainly have spent more time with this group if I had it to do all over again*" (emphasis mine. Maroney 1984:117).

How wise the analysis! How sad that last line! If missions deliberately directed their strategies to the poor, there would be no need to "re-discover" the receptivity of the poor every few years.

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The experience of seeing hundreds of thousands of squatters in destitute poverty is devastating. As history moves towards its climax, the wound in God's heart for this migration of

people must make it difficult for him to hold back his judgment.

If the destitution of the urban poor is staggering in itself, their numerical growth is just as devastating. Since the Second World War there has come an endless convoy of buses into the mega-city capitals of the Third World city-states, disgorging impoverished farmers and teenage adventuresses into their next step towards affluence (or more likely, poverty) in the slums, squatter areas, *favelas*, *barrios* and *bustees*.

Between 1950 and 1980, the urban growth in Third World mega-cities rose from 275 million to just under one billion! It is expected to double by the year 2000 (United Nations 1980). Wherever land can be found, the huts and plywood shacks will go up and few governments will have the capacity to prevent it or to service the people arriving. The majority of the new arrivals will remain in the squatter areas. Each capital city will continue to grow exponentially as it exploits the resources of its rural hinterland.

Some of the most destitute of the poor live in mud homes on the streets of modern Dakha city, a new city, now three million, that will grow to twenty million by the turn of the century. The 730,000 people in the 771 squatter areas (Center for Urban Studies 1983) will, by the year 2000, make up the majority of the population. There is little possibility for the city's industrial growth to keep pace with the migration influx.

In most cities, industrial growth ranges from one to four percent annually. The population growth ranges from twelve to fifteen percent.² Shantytowns (slums, squatter areas) are expected to double in six

years (U.N. 1977:10). Those unable to enter the industrial life of the city remain trapped in lives of service and patronage, without ever being able to secure their own land or housing. The squatter and slum areas comprise from 19.6 percent (Bangkok, Sapon 1985) to sixty-six percent of the city (Calcutta, U.N. Center for Housing). For those trapped in continuing poverty, the reproduction rate remains undiminished. About half of the growth in these cities is due to population growth within the cities themselves (U.N. 1980, U.N. 1983:48).

Hardly a Church, Rarely a Pastor, Seldom a Missionary

More nightmarish than the poverty, and the staggering growth of that poverty, is the fact that there are no more than a handful of God's people ministering among these poor.

I don't mean that there are no relief and development agencies. They are many, and most are doing good work in their defined diaconal roles. *But the church has given the poor bread and kept the bread of life for the middle class.* The search has not been for aid programs but for people who are establishing the Kingdom of God, for men and women working and living among the poor to bring them the bread of life by both word and deed.

Yet in the midst of the darkness are some of today's heroes—in each city, a handful of people who have followed Jesus fully in his calls to renunciation and involvement with the poor. There is a pastor in one west Asian city who wears the sandals and blanket of the poor, walking as holy men do. God has used

him up to a couple of years ago to mobilize and deploy 300 aid workers into the slums. There is a man of God, a doctor, on the streets of one city ministering to the sick. The government has tried to deport him for ministering to the poor. For four years he has remained in the coun-

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try by bringing a court case against the government and quietly continuing.

There is a pastor who for some years has chosen to live among the poor in a relocation area of Manila. He helped build houses for the poorest in his community. The housing manager and gang leaders were curious about this man and his concern for their people. They decided to work with him on the housing. They were converted because he incarnated the love and justice of God among them. There is excitement in Bangkok, for a new generation of creative church leadership is now seeing breakthroughs for the gospel. There are now ninety-seven churches³ in this city of nearly six million. Hidden in these figures there is an old, highly successful, Finnish, Pentecostal church planter. At seventy, he has gone back to daily spending his hours in a slum area, quietly establishing a church.

Nevertheless, in the 1,020 slums (Sapon 1985), there are only two churches and two house groups. That is, two percent of the churches are among the migrant poor. For the



600,000 prostitutes⁴ in Bangkok there are only two ministries. For the 500,000 drug addicts, the first ministry was initiated by some Malaysians in early 1986. These figures are not given to shame us but to compel us to a new focus.

Examples of men and women who are following Jesus in his ministry to the poor should not be the exception but the rule if we as a church were following Jesus. *We must refocus our energies and make the urban poor the primary thrust of missions.*

In an otherwise excellent article on the urban poor, Francis M. DuBose makes an unusual series of conclusions:

"Like the poor who have long gathered in their urban store fronts in America, the Christian communities are proliferating among the urban poor in the wake of an impressive advance of the gospel and are gathering in 'shop churches' and in 'house churches' in all major areas of the world" (1984:70).

This statement is simply not true. Perhaps it is a misunderstanding of the word "poor." To Americans, all the world is poor, including the middle class of the Third World. Or perhaps he is inaccurate because he is using Latin American Catholic categories for the church among the poor. I have wondered whether perhaps his statement is true of the African churches, but discussions with missionaries from those countries indicate that, though there is more activity than in Asia, the percentage and focus of activity is about the same. Two years of research do not bear out his conclusions.

Is Incarnation Necessary?

Some have said to me, "Don't be too fixed on the idea of incarnation as the key." So I talked and visited with those who had tried various things with the poor: missionaries and pastors with hearts for the poor, evangelists who would go in and preach, and churches that have aid

programs. My conclusions certainly have been modified—but come out essentially the same. Rarely had they been successful beyond establishing one or two families long-term into the middle-class church.

One significant movement in Asia is that generated by a dynamo of a friend in Hong Kong, Jackie (Pullinger 1980), through a ministry to drug addicts. As they are freed, many of them move back to the poorer areas where their families live. Out of this ministry has come a movement of disciples, many linked in small fellowships. The key? Jackie has for years slept and worked with these people in the destitution of the Walled City. She has lived among them. She lives much of her time on the streets. After eight-year years she still has no room to call her own.

A life lived among the poor as one of them is the key to a movement. That is part of what Jesus was talking about when he discussed grains of wheat.

In Latin America, statistics are more encouraging than in Asia because of Pentecostal growth. Many Pentecostal pastors have little choice but to work in the slums because of the economic situation. Some years back, Roger Greenway was able to establish significant numbers of slum churches in Mexico working from the outside of the slums and sending workers in (Greenway 1973).

Musing on this excellent case study, the question arises as to whether it negates the need for emphasis on incarnation. Success in this case came through a strategic focus on the slums from the outside. (If we could refocus mission agencies even to this extent that would be a major

achievement.) Yet even within this approach of training and sending workers into the slums, the churches that took root did so when leadership emerged from within the community. It seemed that incarnational leadership, though in this case not that of the missionaries or of the trainees in church-planting, was the key to long-term establishment of the church in these city slums also.

In Manila, a YWAM (Youth with a Mission) training school has established another model that runs

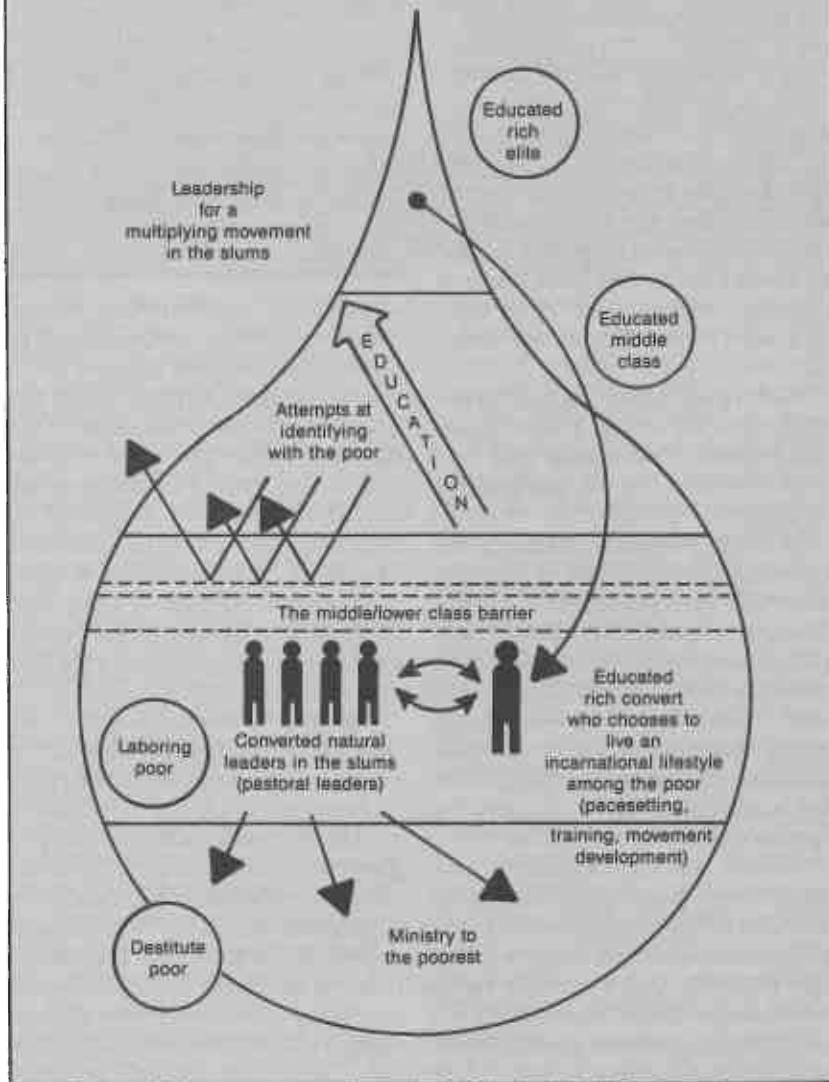
" . . . The church has given the poor bread and kept the bread of life for the middle class."

counter to incarnational theory. They have planted a slum church by sending in, every few months, a new short-term team without much language or cultural orientation. They live in a house just outside of the slum. The work has the expected problems related to a lack of indigeneity but it has been successful. Despite the problems of short-term missions and the cultural lacks, there has been enough identification with the poor for the gospel to take root and bear fruit into a church.

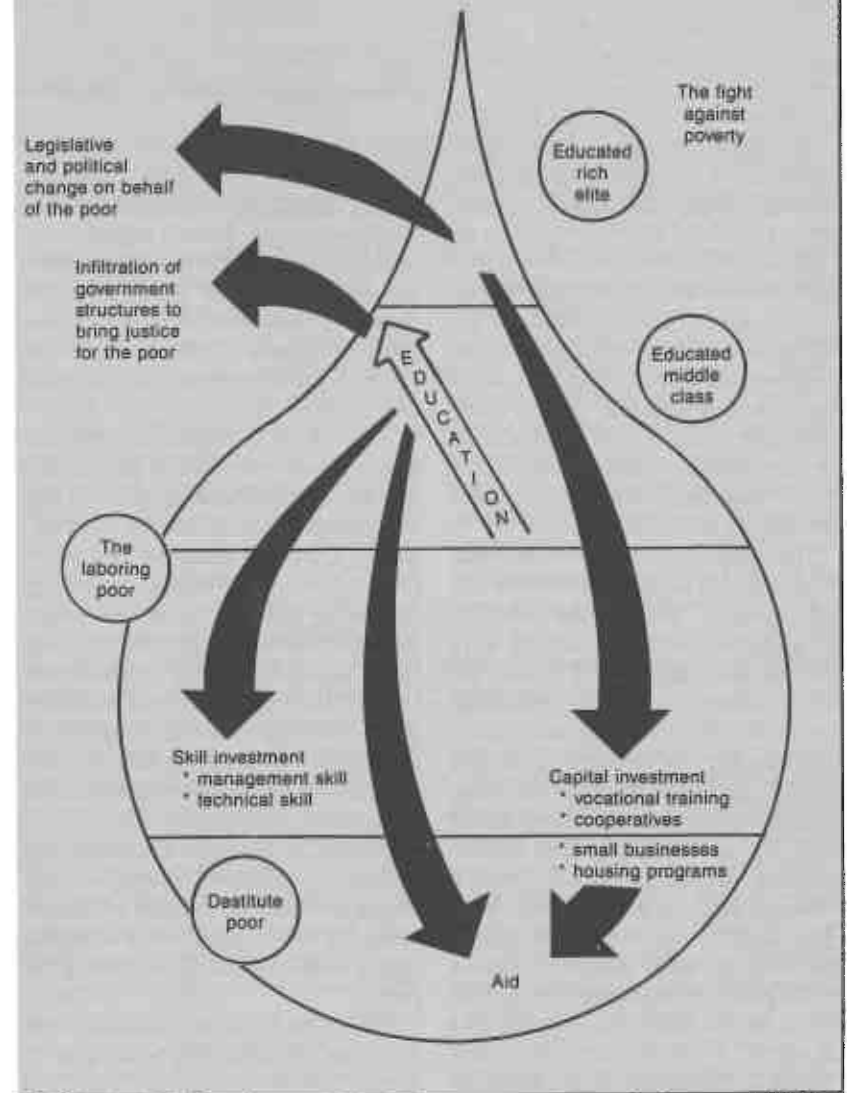
Based on these examples, the question moves from a question of the *necessity* to a question of the *extent* of incarnation. Linked to it is one of the major issues facing missions in the next decades: how to develop slum church leadership so that multiplying movements can be developed.

One of the problems involved is that it is rare to find a natural leader in a slum community who can develop a church beyond seventy people. There are several apparent

Ministry Roles of the Converted in Upper and



Middle Classes in Relationship to the Poor



reasons. Lack of management skills within the culture of poverty is one. For a church to grow beyond seventy requires administrative as well as pastoral skills. The extent of pastoral problems, and the inability of the poor to provide financially for full-time pastors, limit the use of time for broader ministry. Family dynamics tend to limit churches to three extended families, which then get cut off from their religio-cultural context.

It appears from the available data that the extent of incarnational modeling and pastoral leadership from within the communities determines whether the church will be established. My own conclusion is that there are two levels of leadership that must be given: a combination of an educated catalyst, with a broad perspective and managerial skills, leading a score of squatter leaders functioning as pastors. That catalyst may be a foreigner or may be one of the converted, educated rich who chooses to renounce all.

The development of Pentecostal (charismatic) superchurches for the rich elite in places like Manila, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur may provide the opportunity to call the rich to follow Jesus in his renunciation of wealth to minister to the poor. Historically, the leadership of the Catholic orders to the poor has come from the rich elite who have taken Jesus seriously at this point. Unfortunately, present imported Western theology encourages people to keep their wealth, ignoring the gospel teachings on using wealth on behalf of the poor by choosing simple lifestyles, or, for many, renunciation of wealth.

Middle class leadership is useful in

initiating a work, and as a back-up in areas of economic development, legal and medical help, or political issues. But it is threatening to a middle class family to have one of their sons choose the lifestyle of poverty among the poor which seems neces-

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sary to establish churches. These families are still valiantly struggling to stay out of the poverty from which they have come. Thus it appears unwise to invest large amounts of time seeking to develop leadership for squatter churches from this class. Only the leadership that lives in the community can effectively develop the church.

As such, it is unwise to presume that student movements will be the key to the task ahead of us. They may provide some backup, and certainly, if they are trained in a poor-focused, holistic theology, may significantly affect government structures towards justice for the poor. But they should not be the focus of our time and energy if we are to reach the poor (perhaps with the exception of recruiting, while at university, the scions of the rich, elite families into incarnational approaches).

Biblically, we must encourage all people, at whatever level of society they are working, to have a focus of ministry to the poor. This does not imply that all should live among the poor.

We must call all people at all levels of society to lifestyles of simplicity so that others may simply live. This



does not imply that all should live among the poor.

We must call all to the patterns of renunciation we see in Jesus' teaching. This does not imply that all should live among the poor.

But we must also hold out to our people the further call of Jesus for many to take up an apostolic lifestyle of identification with the poor in order that the poor people's church might be established.

Is incarnation essential? For church-planting, the leadership of the church in the slums must be incarnate in the community. The missionary, in order to train others in such pastoral work, must set the patterns of identification and model the incarnational lifestyle.

On the other hand, as development work in the slums has been observed, incarnation does not appear to be essential. However, even development work is greatly advanced by people who work with people from their own perspective rather than work for them. And if developmental work is to be done

from a Kingdom perspective where the goal is more than projects, incarnation appears necessary.

In Thailand, I spent time with some Buddhist community organizers who have captured from a Christian this concept of living among the poor in order to serve them. They are paying a price for enabling the people. Why do the Christians pay a lesser price? Incarnation is more effective. It gives the poor a greater sense of dignity. It is more just. It is more loving. But no, it is not essential for development workers.

The Great Misconnection

When faced with the sad failure of the great mission thrust to reach these poor, one must ask "Why?" and beyond the why "What can be done to rectify the failure?" The following appear to be some factors:

1. As mission leaders, we have failed to foresee both the urban growth, and the fact that most of the urban growth will be in squatter areas. The opportunity to save the cities from

many traumas associated with this development, the opportunity to establish a church in every squatter area as it has formed, has been lost almost entirely. As Tom Sine says, we have in our long-range planning unconsciously assumed a static view of the future (1981:17).

People are being thrust out to the last frontier, but the last frontier has moved. Perhaps we could encourage the U.S. Center for World Mission to revise their charts of unreached peoples. Instead of dividing them by religious groupings alone, perhaps they should also be divided into urban/rural and rich/poor. We may

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find that the largest grouping of truly “unmissionaried” people would be the urban poor.

2. There are some missions that have made a deliberate strategy to go for the rich, believing in a sort of religious “trickle-down” theory. “Trickle-down” no more works in the Kingdom than it does in the economic realm. This strategic mistake lacks in both biblical exegesis and in sociological analysis and has already been refuted (see, for example, McGavran 1980:269-294).

The gospel “trickles up.” Any man or woman who would follow Jesus to walk among the poor will affect countless of the middle and rich classes. They come because they are

curious. They hear of good deeds and, like Nicodemus, they know that this is reality. The converted rich come because, despite the failure of affluent missionaries to preach the Scriptures about repentance for unjust wealth or to live simply themselves, these new believers can read the Bible. They come searching for the person who has chosen the poor because here they know is a true answer to their problems of wealth. They come because they are concerned now for the uplift of those they have previously exploited. Jesus has an answer for the rich man. The rich middle class missionary often has only words.

3. For the same strategic reasons as America failed in the Vietnam War, it has failed in this spiritual war. Depending on affluent and high-powered programmatic approaches, the mission force has been out of touch with the realities of the Third World poor. A missionary living on \$2,800 per month in an American-style house, sending his children to an American-style school, trying to reach people who live on \$200 per year, is like a B-52 bomber attacking guerrillas.

4. However, this failure in the great American mission thrust is, at its roots, not a strategic but a spiritual failure. An American church trapped by cultural perspectives on affluence rather than biblical opposition to the American “god of mammon” has exported this into missions. We must return to the pattern of Jesus, who chose non-destitute poverty as a way of life, who took the time to learn language and culture and who refused to be the welfare agency king. We must return to the way of the apostles and of the

wandering friars who have been the key to the conversion of the world in generations before us. Non-destitute poverty and simplicity must again become focal in missions strategy.

5. Some perhaps have concluded that the poor are unreachable. This is a culturally logical conclusion for those of European descent growing up in the capitalism of the United States. Claerbaut (1983:69-70), in an excellent analysis on urban ministry, has some penetrating insights into

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American cultural attitudes to the poor.

“The truths of stratification and self-perpetuation of the socioeconomic system are not widely known or accepted. As a result, negative attitudes towards the poor persist. To argue that poverty is a self-perpetuating condition in a capitalistic society is to attack the nation's sacred civil doctrine of the self-made person. To suggest that one is poor because of an unequal distribution of opportunities is to suggest that riches are as much a matter of good fortune as virtue.”

However, the poverty of the Third World urban poor is a direct result of social forces and oppression, not personal sin. Such oppressed poor in the Scriptures are considered to be rich in faith and the ones for whom the Kingdom is particularly to be preached (Grigg 1985:47-50).

6. The propensity for the American church to accept the agenda of the aid organizations as focal to the Great Commission has seri-

ously skewed mission. Mission to the middle class is seen as proclamation. To the poor it has become giving handouts or assisting in development as defined by Christianized humanitarian perspectives. It is far easier for churches to give thousands of dollars than to find one of their members who would walk into the slums for a decade.

A Proposal: Protestant Orders with Vows of Non-Destitute Poverty

My convictions have deepened and been modified during these months of research, wandering and preaching to the poor.

The central conviction remains: we must thrust out groups similar to the Catholic devotional communities of preaching friars. In our case, we must send communities of men and women, marrieds and singles, with commitments to live poor among the poor in order to preach the Kingdom and establish the church in these great slum areas. Westerners and upper class nationals who choose such lives of non-destitute poverty will be catalysts for movements of lay leaders from among the poor in each city. The spearhead of such a thrust will be those who accept the gift of singleness for some years. We must set up new mission structures for this to happen. The key is older couples who will choose to be recycled into this kind of ministry lifestyle and can give leadership to these communities of pioneers.

1. *Orders.* We need men and women who will commit themselves to lifetimes of simplicity, poverty, devotion, community and sacrifice in areas of marriage and family. We need orders that free men and

women for pioneering, apostolic, prophetic, church-planting, and mobile roles rather than an order that limits people to a rigid structure.

2. *Devotional communities.* Most mission teams are not communities, but teams. The focus of most teams is to work. On the other hand, traditional communities in the church are

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by definition primarily committed to relational caring, worship and a devotional pattern. These emphases are essential if workers are to survive in the slums. Working and living two by two in various slum areas, they need to come together every two weeks for a day of ministry to each other, of worship and relaxation.

3. *Poverty, chastity, obedience.* The needed commitments to non-destitute poverty are similar to the older Catholic orders without the legalism. So too are the commitments to singleness, not as vows of celibacy, but for periods of time. As Protestants, we have lost the concept of the gift of singleness. Marriage has been seen as the only ideal. The biblical blessing on chosen or given singleness has to be recovered. Part of the blessing of that gift is the freedom to pioneer in difficult and dangerous places.

4. *New Structures.* Historically, movements among the poor have consistently been thrown out of the middle class churches. It is traumatic for one missionary living on \$2,800 per month to have to be in the same

mission team with one who is willing to receive only the \$300 for his own living expenses and all his ministry and travel costs. In order to avoid such traumas it would be wise for mission directors to create new orders of men and women called to the poor. These could be within or without their old mission boards. Ultimately, this will enhance effectiveness and prevent disharmony. However, these orders should only be under the authority of persons who have lived, for long periods, this kind of sacrificial and incarnational lifestyle. They should never give authority to administrators who have not lived out this lifestyle. Incarnational workers do not want protection. They want pastoral care from leaders who have been on the front line and who will keep them at the front line and take the bullets out when the workers are shot up.

5. May God touch the heart of some *older experienced couples* with these cries of the poor. May he raise up couples who are willing to take on a harder missionary task than they have faced in the past. Then perhaps we may redeem ourselves from failure.

An Opportunity Lost?

God is offering the opportunity to American missions to return to the biblical commitment to the poor and to incarnation as the primary missionary role model. The need is urgent for several thousand catalysts in the slums of scores of Third World cities who can generate movements in each city. Two billion people cry out!

If the American mission leaders, boards and pastors do not heed this call, God will sidestep them and turn

to the emerging Latin American and Third World missions to meet this focus of mission in the next decades. How sad to miss the focal call of the scriptures to preach the gospel to the poor! For the God who sent his son to a manger will find a way to send other sons and daughters to those poor for whom particularly he came. He will not leave their cries unheard.

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Appendix B: Notes

¹Figures on numbers of churches are from an extensive survey of the church in the city. Figures on numbers of street people are a conservative estimate between the 1971 government estimate of 48,800 and

various estimates of up to 400,000 from more general news articles and researchers. Numbers of *bustees* and refugees are documented from the Metropolitan Planning Office of this city.

²The U.N. quotes a figure of fifteen percent growth of shantytowns worldwide (1977:10).

³Figure from Bill Smith, Church Growth researcher on Bangkok.

⁴Figures for prostitutes and drug addicts have been discussed and checked with a number of sources and appear to be conservative and generally accepted. They reflect government, church leadership and media opinions.

Appendix C:

Some Large Mega-Cities in the Third World

City	Total Estimated Population By Year 2000 (Millions) ¹	Percentage Living in Slum/Squatter Communities in 1980 ²
Mexico City	31.6	46
Sao Paulo, Brazil	26.0	
Calcutta, India	19.7	67
Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	19.4	30
Shanghai, China	19.2	
Bombay, India	19.1	45
Beijing, China	19.1	
Seoul, South Korea	18.7	29
Jakarta, Indonesia	16.9	26
Cairo, Egypt	16.4	
Karachi, Pakistan	15.9	23
Buenos Aires, Argentina	14.0	
Delhi, India	13.2	36
Manila, Philippines	12.7	35
Lima, Peru	12.1	40
Bangkok-Thonburi, Thailand	11.0	18
Baghdad, Iraq	10.9	29
Madras, India	10.4	25
Bogota, Colombia	9.5	60
Kinshasa, Zaire	9.1	60
Istanbul, Turkey	8.3	40
Caracas, Venezuela	6.0	42

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¹Facts on File, Inc., *The New Book of World Rankings*, pp. 420, 422-423, 426. City populations credited to U.N. Demographic Yearbook.

²Compilation from U.N. Dept. of International Social and Economic Affairs *Population Studies No. 68* (1980), and "City Populations 1950-2000." In *Patterns of Urban and Rural Population Growth*. United Nations (1980).

