URBAN MISSION: THE NEW FRONTIER

Posted on December 9, 2014 by Eddie

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Category: Observations

The future for the church and mission lies in the cities of the world.

OUR URBAN FUTURE Â€“ AND PRESENT

180,000 move to cities every day, 65 million per year. There are three key things we notice about cities; the growth of cities in terms of numbers and size, the growth of cities in the southern hemisphere and the enormous socioeconomic needs of cities.

Phenomenal Growth

When the modern missionary movement began in the early 1800s less than 3% of the worldâ€™s population live in cities. By 1900 it had risen to 14%, by 1980 40% and it is expected to reach 80% by 2050.

At current rates, the urban population will double in 20 years.

In 1950, there wre two megacities with more than 10M people, by 2012, there were 27, with two more close to that level.

Growth of Cities in the Southern Hemisphere

The original urban revolution of the 19 and 20 centuries occurred in the Western world. From the second half of the C20, growth has taken place in the poorer countries of the south.

In 1950 6/10 of the worlds largest cities were in the North, now only one (New York) is. USA has 73 cities over 500,000, W. Europe has 62, but China has 145, India 93 and the rest of Asia 168, while Africa has 91. 21 of 27 megacities are in the south.

Enormous Socioeconomic Need

Today the poor are primarily in urban, not rural settings. Over a billion people live in slums. 72% of the African urban population are in slums

Future projections do not look hopeful

THE IMPORTANCE OF CITIES FOR MISSION

Sheer Numbers

Quite simply, the cities are where people are. The number of people in cities today outnumbers the whole world population 100 years ago. Virtually all of the world population increase expected in the

next 100 years will occur in cities.

Culture, Power and Influence

Cities are the centres of cultural power and influence. Cities exert huge influence on the countries they are found in and networked cities impact the whole world. Cities contain the next generation, the unreached, the poor and the shapers of culture.

Cities may be replacing nation-states as the basis of political and economic power.

The Focal Point of a Global Missionary Encounter

We need to understand the city as a communal pattern of life in which religion is made visible in a variety of ways. All of the worldâ€™s religions meet in our cities today. Globalisation, is a huge force in cities and it is in cities that the Gospel needs to confront it.

Poverty and Socioeconomic Need

â€œUrban poor constitute the largest unclaimed frontier that Christian mission has ever encountered.â€

The biggest cause of poverty in the south is unjust structures at global and economic level.

Decreasing presence of Christians

There are few Christians in the cities. Partly because cities are growing where numbers of Christians are already low, but also because (in the West, especially) Christians are fleeing the cities.

AN AGENDA FOR URBAN MISSION

Engaging Secular Folk

In the West we need to learn how to engage with secular people and to engage with their issues. Keller lists these as:

- Other Religions â€“ all are equally valid.
- Evil & Suffering â€“ how can a good god allow suffering?
- Ethical Straightjacket â€“ we must be free to think for ourselves and make our own rules.
- Record of Christians â€“ if Christianity is true, how come Christians have such a patchy history?
- The Angry God â€“ how can you believe in that God?
- The Issue of Science â€“ science and religion conflict and science wins.
- The Unreliable Bible â€“ you canâ€™t trust it.

Polemical, self-righteous answers to questions like these will alienate people.

We need to learn to speak the language that people speak, so that we can communicate with them.

Religious jargon doesnâ€™t work.

We must make the gospel to be good news for all aspects of their lives. An otherworldly gospel has no traction with this generation.

Establishing a countercultural identity through community

The church is called to be a preview and foretaste of the coming kingdom. We must live in contrast to the idolatry of our age, while living in fulfilment of the creation.

A countercultural community looks for and celebrates the good in the city, but rejects idolatry. The problem is that all aspects of the city have both good and bad. So how do we celebrate the value of work, while challenging materialism and work-aholism? How do we celebrate the good in creation, while challenging materialism? Keller identifies five areas where we must confront the city:

- Sexuality (neither prudish nor accepting of sexual idolatry)
- Money (promote generosity and reject materialism)
- Power (promote relationship building between groups)
- Unity (finding ways to express unity with other Christians, not focussing on differences)
- Community (the need for true community in the city).

Practicing holistic mission

There are many people in the cities who do not know Jesus and many who live in dreadful poverty. What is the relationship between evangelism and social action in this setting?

Training believers for their calling in the public sector

The main way the church can impact on injustice is not through institutional involvement, but through individual Christians living out their calling in the public square. This is particularly important because many people are only in cities because of work â€“ this is their primary engagement with the world. Christians must learn how to be distinctive in the workplace.

- Work is the primary place where a witness to Christ can take place
- Work can be an instrument of Godâ€™s common grace to transform the world.

Sadly, many churches do not take this seriously.

Planting urban churches

Paul planted churches in cities and we need to do the same. Sadly, there is very little church planting in many of the slums of the megacities. Churches must be planted that welcome and engage non-Christians.

A THEOLOGY OF MISSION FOR THE CITY

We donâ€™t simply need theology done in cities, we need a purposeful theology which addresses the needs of cities.

The Need for reflection on the gospel

To often we strategize pragmatically about how to reach the cities; what we need is a deeper theological reflection that helps the church in its urban mission. The church must wrestle with numerous theological matters â€“ some of them common to all aspects of mission; contextualisation, a theology of religions, apologetics, answers to the questions of urban dwellers, the form and function of missional churches. The Bibleâ€™s teaching on principalities and powers is important, too, as is idolatry in the modern urban setting.

We need to struggle with Scripture in the light of the city, but also to look at how the church has approached these things through history.

The need for urban studies

We need a study of cities that is shaped by the gospel. We need to understand how cities were founded following the industrial revolution and the differences between cities in the north and south. Urban growth in the south is much more rapid and cities have had less time to assimilate a huge population.

We need to understand the different types of cities and the landscape of cities today.

We need to understand the church in its urban context so that we can raise the right questions and seek the right approaches.

The need for contextualisation

Contextualisation sets the urban world within the context of the biblical story in such a way that it both affirms and critiques the world.

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Theological education

We need theological education that trains leaders and pastors for ministry in the city.

ELEMENTS OF A FAITHFUL MISSIONAL CONGREGATIONS

The most powerful witness of the gospel in the city will be congregations that incarnate the gospel in the context of urban life.

Studies have shown the following as key:

- Commitment to the gospel
- The attempt to understand the culture and dynamics of the city
- Prayer
- Identification with and concern for the poor
- High priority on fellowship, on small and cell groups
- Strong emphasis on training good leaders
- Contextualisation
- High demand for â€œlayâ€ involvement
- Strong discipleship programs for new Christians
- The entire church mobilized for evangelism and mission

There are barriers, such as unwillingness to become more inclusive which hinder churches in urban mission and positive factors such as the centrality of worship and strong leadership which help it.

Conclusion

God wants Jonah to love what he loves: Nineveh. If you love God, you will love the city.

This is part of my continuing series making notes onÂ Â Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History and IssuesÂ by Mike Goheen.Â If you are finding these notes helpful, a small contribution to the running costs of Kouyanet would not go amiss â€“ or you could get us a book from the list on the right.Â

Some Â personal thoughts in follow up:

- If you are interested in the issue of urban mission and our response to it, this research might be helpful.
- In countries with a lot of different ethnic groups and languages, city dwellers - over a generation or two - will often lose their identification with a particular language or ethnicity. They become citizens of the city, speaking a variety of languages as the occasion demands and not fitting neatly into any box. Favourite missiological classifications such as Unreached People Groups, or Bible-less Peoples, often don't make much sense when we come up against the mega-cities of the South. The need is no less, but our descriptions don't always fit reality.