Culture and the City: Rethinking Contextualization for Urban Peoples

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At a seminary in Southeast Asia where I teach, a group of us were discussing worship in the church. A trained ethnomusicologist was among those in the discussion. She lamented that the local churches in our diverse, global city had "lost their song." Her statement caused me to think about worship in a diverse city. Whose song should the urban church be singing? The ethnomusicologist had in mind traditional tribal music developed during a different era. Yet, I can scan local radio all day long and not find the traditional tribal music playing. Can that really be "their song"?

Urban churches are not struggling with only the choice of music. There was a time when church planting was primarily conceived of as targeting homogeneous communities, with one primary culture. But cities are a mix of cultural influences, practices, and worldviews behind those practices. Furthermore, urban churches, if they are reaching their cities, will have to contend with many cultural influences at work. Contextualization that befits an urban church must be able to engage the confluence of cultures in the city simultaneously.

In this article, I will explore the vital topic of contextualization through the lens of urban diversity. The principles of contextualization have not changed. But, current understandings of culture, indigeneity, and ethnicity have changed considerably. This reality is partly because the forces of globalization, technology, and urbanization prohibit conceptions of culture in flat and static categories. In fact, culture and ethnicity have never been static. This article will work towards some initial solutions and, as such, serve as a conversation starter. I hope that others will take the conversation further by adding their experiences and insights. Our goal should be to see urban churches that are able to engage within the cultural plurality of their cities.

Cultural Plurality and Urban Life

The neighborhood in Southeast Asia where I have lived with my family for more than a decade is an average, predominately local neighborhood. It is not an expatriate enclave, nor is it culturally trendy. My kids have grown up with kids from different linguistic and religious backgrounds. They learn how to navigate different cultures without even thinking about it. The other kids in the neighborhood are shaped by similar cross-cultural interactions. This exchange is one aspect of urban life.

It is very difficult to remain culturally insulated in a city. Culture is not passed on through a formalized curriculum. People pick up culture constantly, with every human interaction and even by using human-made things (material culture and built environment). The density and diversity of the city guarantee that people will absorb culture from countless influences.

The marketplace demonstrates the difficulty of living in a city and remaining free of an immeasurable swirl of cultures. If you travel to just about any global city, you are likely to find chain stores from Japan, Korea, America, Italy, South Africa, and Sweden. There are IKEA stores in the major

cities of more than 60 nations.[1] This means families are walking through the IKEA showroom maze in China and India, drawing home decorating ideas from the Swedes. One trip to a mall might involve indirect interactions with dozens of cultures and likely many hybridized ones. For example, someone might have a Churro from a Korean chain or a Turkish-styled quesadilla in a mall in Jakarta. It would be very hard for someone to live in a city and not be influenced by an immeasurable swirl of cultures.

In missiology, culture has most often been tied to ethnicity. This tendency was heavily influenced by early anthropology that studied remote societies, where cultural influences were primarily from within the society.[2] Anthropologists largely avoided doing their field work in cities because it would have been far too messy. Even as "urban anthropology" came about, it predominately studied small village communities adjusting to urban life.[3] Several influential missiologists since 1974 were trained anthropologists[4]

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[1] "List of Countries with IKEA Stores," Wikiwand, accessed August 7, 2023, https://wikiwand.com/en/List_of_countries_with_IKEA_stores.

[2] Brian M. Howell and Jenell Williams Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 30.

[3] Robert V. Kemper and Jack R. Rollwagen, "Urban Anthropology," in *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*, ed. David Levinson and Melvin Ember (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996), 1337.

[4] Among those who were trained anthropologists and wrote publications in missiology are Sherwood Lingenfelter, Charles Kraft, Alan Tippett, Paul Hiebert, William Smalley, and Darrell Whiteman. Sherwood G. Lingenfelter, *Transforming Culture: A Challenge for Christian Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992); Sherwood G. Lingenfelter, *Agents of Transformation: A Guide for Effective Cross-Cultural Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996); Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979); Charles H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997); Alan Tippet, *People Movements in Southern Polynesia: Studies in the Dynamics of Church-Planting and Growth in Tahiti, New Zealand, Tonga, and Samoa,* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1971); Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994); Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985); Darrell L. Whiteman, *Melanesians and Missionaries* (Wipf and Stock, 2002); Darrell L. Whiteman, *An Introduction to Melanesian Cultures* (Melanesian Institute, 1984); William A. Smalley, ed., *Readings in Missionary Anthropology* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1974).

and imported this view of culture heavily tied to ethnicity into missions practice.[5] An updated understanding of culture and ethnicity is vital to the consideration of contextualization in urban contexts.

Contextualization for Homogeneous Contexts

There is a sense in which contextualization has always been practiced. As the earliest church spread from Jerusalem, there was a process of contextualization. The translatability of the gospel has been an enduring characteristic of Christianity.[6] However, as Protestants developed their global missions efforts, the primary focus was on language translation with little attention paid to culture and worldview. For many missionaries, culture was seen as an impediment to the gospel. Missionaries from Western nations presumed their own culture was the model of Christian culture.[7]

Western cultural pride took a major hit with the eruption of two World Wars in the same century. Then, along with the rise of anthropology, missiologists became more aware of cultures and the need to contextualize the gospel and Christian practice in different cultural contexts. In evangelical circles, the conversation around contextualization is only fifty years old.[8]

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[5] Robert J. Priest, "The Value of Anthropology for Missiological Engagements with Context: The Case of Witch Accusations," *Missiology* 43, no. 1 (December 2014): 27–42.

[6] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

[7] This trend is sometimes described as a pursuit of the three C's: Christianity, commerce, and civilization. Andrew Porter, "Missions and Empire, c. 1873-1914," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity: World Christianities, c. 1815-c. 1914*, ed. Sheridan Gilley and Brian Stanley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 560.

[8] The first use of "contextualization" appeared in 1971. Although contextualization was not emphasized in evangelical circles, it has a long, complex history. The practice of orienting the message to the context of the receptor goes back to Jesus and Paul (cf. John 4; Acts 17). A number of terms have been used and defined variously: indigenization, nativization, accommodation, adaption. Jesuit missionaries debated many issues related to contextualization as they entered India, Japan, and China. Protestant missions was slower to move beyond more visible forms of cultural adjustment (i.e., language, musical style, dress). Gilliland sees this previous era as indigenization and the shift to focus on

Much of the writing and thinking about contextualization happened as evangelicals began to direct their focus to unreached people groups. As a result, contextualization was applied to ethnolinguistic people groups. Missionaries were taught to study the people group as a singular culture. They were labeled the *receptor culture*.[9] The missionary was to be mindful of three cultures: the missionary's culture (A), biblical culture (B), and the receptor culture (C).[10] Thus, the missionary translates culture B into their own culture (A) and then translates from culture A to culture C. The ideal would be to go directly from culture B to culture C, but that is difficult. The difficulty comes when the receptor community is a mix of cultures and influences.

The three-culture process functioned on a simplified understanding of culture. However, if the missionary assumes everyone in the community is like culture C, then efforts at contextualization will connect with some and marginalize others. Early examples of contextualization tended to simplify cultural diversity. In *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture*, Alan Tippett used Fiji as an example.[11] Such a society, isolated by the ocean all around, simplified the process.

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deep culture and worldview as contextualization. Dean S. Gilliland, "Contextualization," in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapid, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 225–26; Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

[9] David Hesselgrave, "Contextualization That Is Authentic and Relevant," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 12, no. 3 (July 1995): 200.

[10] This pattern can be seen even in the chapter titles of Daniel Shaw's work on contextualization. R. Daniel Shaw, *Transculturation: The Cultural Factor in Translation and Other Communication Tasks* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1988).

[11] Alan R. Tippet, "Contextualization of the Gospel in Fiji - A Case Study from Oceania," in *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture*, ed. John R. W. Stott and Robert T. Coote (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1980), 287–307.

The forces of *glurbalization*[12] (globalization and urbanization) have meant that very few cultures remain in isolation. In the modern world, the introduction of air travel, satellite dishes, and the internet, mean that even an island is no longer isolated. True cultural homogeneity is rarer and rarer. Craig Ott calls for contextualization that accounts for this new cultural reality.[13]

A Superficial Understanding of Culture

Missiologists, armed with early anthropology, tied culture heavily to ethnicity. Furthermore, culture is often understood by missionaries as fixed.[14] In a previous era, many anthropologists were *essentialists* and *perennialists*. An *essentialist* viewed ethnicity as the primary identity with which someone navigated social contexts. A *perennialist* viewed ethnicity as the primary way to bring structure and stability to a society.[15]

Today, anthropologists have a different understanding of culture and ethnicity. Sociologist Andreas Wimmer notes: "Few authors today dare argue for the givenness, transsituational stability, and deep-rooted character of ethnic cultures and identities."[16] Rather, culture is dynamic, flexible, and may or may not be tied to traditional cultures. The more urban, the more likely culture is going to change and morph according to the mix of influences in

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[12] Jonathan Ro, "Glurbanization: The Social Intersect between Globalization and Urbanization" (Urban Mission and Transformation Consultation, 2019, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: pre-published, 2019).

[13] Craig Ott, "Globalization and Contextualization: Reframing the Task of Contextualization in the Twenty-First Century," *Missiology: An International Review* 43, no. 1 (2015): 44.

[14] Daniel Shaw describes the Maxikali of Brazil set in their culture with no likelihood of changing. Shaw, *Transculturation*, 150.

[15] Andreas Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making: Institutions, Power, Networks* (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1.

[16] Wimmer, 2.

the city. Culture can no longer be considered boundaried or isolated from other cultures.[17]

The way ethnicity is understood is also undergoing change. Ethnicity is often constructed for political advantage[18] or exaggerated for tourism. And, people are more likely to develop multiple identities and move in and out of them depending on their context.[19]

Missionaries must adapt to these new insights. In order to think about contextualization well, we must be able to understand culture well. If culture is defined inaccurately, it will impact missions practice adversely. Missionaries will be unable to pivot practices and methods to meet the needs of the moment if they remain unaware of the ever-changing tides of cultural change.

My great grandmother illustrates the malleability of culture. She landed on Ellis Island from Germany. Having landed in the melting pot of New York City, my great grandmother culturally adapted to her environment. My grandfather (her son) did not exhibit any characteristics from having a German grandmother. By no means was my grandfather cultureless, however. Instead, it testifies to the power of an urban, hybridized culture.

Cities as Cultural Blenders

Roberta King is an ethnomusicologist who has studied musical forms in Africa. Her work has contributed to authentic expressions of worship that connect to the hearts of African worshippers. However, when she got to the urban context and saw the influences of modern and non-African music, her default was to go back out to the village to study traditional contexts to

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[17] Howell and Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology*, 29.

[18] Ott, "Globalization and Contextualization: Reframing the Task of Contextualization in the Twenty-First Century," 50.

[19] Ott, 49.

find the "hidden cultural forms" for contextualization.[20] This bias towards traditional ethnic heritage misses the potential for other equally important cultural impacts amalgamated within the city.

Global youth culture, social media, and other media have a deeper impact on urban peoples than we might realize. Nels Anderson, in his landmark essay "Urbanism and Urbanization," noted that rural culture has a defensive posture, but cities have a more dynamic and aggressive influence on the individual.[21] In other words, urban cultural influences have a more dominant role in the urban dweller's cultural framework.

Cities bring together diverse cultural influences as well as urban life influences. Some aspects of life in cities are unique to cities like interacting with strangers, using public transportation, or navigating crowds, traffic, and population density. These cities are becoming what Leonie Sandercock dubbed "mongrel cities."[22] Mongrel cities are where the confluence of cultures requires new patterns for negotiating life in the city. Paul Hiebert and Eloise Meneses tell us that urban life "with its emphasis on individualism, freedom, and mobility, is a strong counterforce to the bonds of ethnicity. People are forced to work together in government and business, marriages between people of different ethnic communities take place, and mixed neighborhoods spring up."[23] Nothing is static in cities. The confluence of ideas, cultures, and subcultures not merely wields influence but vies for dominance. Everything becomes de-territorialized. Kuhn describes this process:

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[20] Roberta R. King, "Variations on a Theme of Appropriate Contextualization: Music Lessons from Africa," in *Appropriate Christianity*, ed. Charles H. Kraft (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2005), 321.

[21] Nels Anderson, "Urbanism and Urbanization," *American Journal of Sociology* 65, no. 1 (1959): 72.

[22] Leonie Sandercock, *Cosmopolis II: Mongrel Cities of the 21st Century* (London; New York: Continuum, 2003).

[23] Paul Hiebert and Eloise Meneses, *Incarnational Ministry: Planting Churches in Band, Tribal, Peasant, and Urban Societies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 284.

> This cultural de-territorialisation has resulted in formation of new kinds of identities 'beyond culture', identities that are as a consequence no longer fixed but indeterminant, fluid, and hybrid. Moreover, as identity formation shifts from essentializing to fluid and hybridizing new, more inclusive and cosmopolitan practices begin to emerge.[24]

City dwellers exposed to blended cultures and identities develop options for their own identity and cultural expression. One does not live in a city without being changed by the city. A few years back I had the opportunity to visit Yangon, Myanmar. Myanmar has an estimated 135 distinct ethnic groups (Chin, Karen, Chinese, Indian, Rohingya, Burman, etc.).[25] All of those ethnic groups can be found in the city of Yangon. Yangon has become a hub of languages, cultures, histories, and religions. It is not merely the mixing of cultures. Some of these that come to Yangon are from very rural locations. One can observe them as they struggle to step onto an escalator or get told by a stranger not to spit their betel leaf in the mall. Life in the city changes them irreversibly. However, it is not merely a rural-to-urban shift that changes people.

One's ethnic background intensifies in a homogeneous village but gets diluted and altered in a city where many cultures come together. And in Yangon it is not just the different ethnic groups of Myanmar that come together. After Myanmar nationals go abroad to work or study, they bring back other cultural influences. It is not uncommon to find shops serving Malaysian specialties. Less obviously, those who work overseas might bring back work habits and culture that differ from the norm in Myanmar. Over time Yangon has developed a hybridized culture that is blended and morphed beyond distinguishable cultural influences.

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[24] Joel S. Kahn, *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2006), 162.

[25] "Myanmar - World Directory of Minorities & Indigenous Peoples," Minority Rights Group International, June 19, 2015, https://minorityrights.org/country/myanmarburma/.

Given that cities contain both a distinctly urban culture as well as a blended mix of the cultures at play in urban contexts, it is important for the church to take notice. A church overly contextualized to one culture limits the impact of the church to reach anyone who does not fit a precise cultural stereotype. If one assumes that the congregation is monocultural, then worship, preaching, and discipleship across the board will miss the mark. This does not mean that a church can cater to every culture present in the city. The point, rather, is that even a *monocultural* church in a city, is not as *monocultural* as one might suppose. For example, I once preached in an Indonesian church in Queens, New York. At first glance, everyone (almost) speaks Indonesian and shares Indonesian culture. But the church is made up of Indonesians from a variety of cultural backgrounds (Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian backgrounds, young, old, formational years in Indonesia, formational years in New York, etc.). In other words, that church in Queens was not nearly as homogeneous as one might initially think.

A Word about Enclaves and Homogeneous Churches

As some read about cities as cultural blenders, the question of enclaves or other ethnically homogeneous population pockets may come to the fore. Cities certainly are hosts to enclaves, including ethnic enclaves. Mark Abrahamson describes urban enclaves as concentrations of residents who share an identity (ethnic, socioeconomic, lifestyle, etc.). Traditionally, enclaves have been thought of as inner city-based and segregated according to ethnicity. Abrahamson illustrates through a number of examples that urban enclaves can be suburban or oriented around other affinities.[26] Besides ethnicity, he compares characteristics of enclaves with subcultures with one notable difference, "place tie."[27] Subcultures are not necessarily tied to a geo-

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[26] Mark Abrahamson, *Urban Enclaves: Identity and Place in America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 2.

[27] Abrahamson, 3.

graphical location, whereas enclaves are tied to a place. The formation of an enclave does not necessitate a hundred percent of a neighborhood. If there is no other dominant identity, as little as twenty-five percent of a population with a singular commonality will make it noticeable as an enclave.[28]

It is good to recognize those who are culturally cut off from others in the city. Certainly, language is a significant barrier. And there should definitely be churches in a city worshipping with all of the languages spoken in the city. A language-specific church, however, is not quite the same thing as a homogenous church. Language-based churches still have a posture of welcome to all who speak the language. A homogeneous church starts with an assumption of boundaries.[29] Only those who fit the category are welcome.

In the height of the people group missiology paradigm, much of international church planting was thought of in terms of planting churches for each ethnolinguistic people group. Donald McGavran, who is generally credited with developing the *homogeneous unit principle* (HUP), thought of a fulfilled Great Commission as looking like a *mosaic* of homogeneous units. Over time, practitioners applied this primarily to people groups. McGavran, however, never defined homogeneous units only by ethnicity.[30] In urban settings, McGavran saw very different homogeneous units based on class, geography, and subculture.[31]

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[28] Abrahamson, 8.

[29] The notion of the homogeneous unit as the focus of church planting goes back to Donald McGavran. He defines a homogeneous unit here: "A homogeneous unit of society may be said to have people consciousness when its members think of themselves as a separate tribe, caste, or class." Even this definition implies a clear delineation of who is inside and who is outside the group. Donald Anderson McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 155.

[30] Jeffrey Kirk Walters Sr., " 'Effective Evangelism' in the City: Donald McGavran's Missiology and Urban Contexts" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Louisville, KY, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011), 54.

[31] McGavran was a complex thinker who is sometimes characterized unfairly. Troy Bush offers a more nuanced treatment of McGavran in light of many critics of his due to HUP. Troy L. Bush, "The Homogeneous Unit Principle and the American Mosaic," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Missions and Evangelism* 2 (Fall 2016): 25–46.

There is not space for a full discussion on the missiological viability of HUP. Cities will inevitably have enclaves and pockets of people who see themselves as part of a group. This leads some to conclude that urban missionaries should plant homogeneous churches. While there is certainly a need to plant churches for all kinds of people in the city, it may be more helpful to consider how churches can be planted to include more people rather than trying to plant a church for each *culture* found in the city.

There are a number of reasons why the homogeneous approach to church planting is not the best choice for urban church planting. First, homogeneous church planting encourages a static and stereotyped view of culture. As we have established, culture is dynamic and any particular cultural group in a city will have a wide range of cultural influences. Targeting a fixed cultural caricature will inevitably exclude many who might otherwise be open to the gospel.[32] Second, homogeneous church planting encourages cultural boundaries rather than theological boundaries for church membership.[33] Francis DuBose saw the danger of this approach as perpetuating the culture.[34] Third, and most important, homogeneous church planting is not the New Testament approach to church planting.[35] It is noteworthy that Paul and

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[32] Erik Hyatt gives the example of a predominately white church who had a vibrant international student ministry. They struggled to integrate international students into their homogenous church. Hyatt argues for an intentional diversity in order to welcome everyone. Erik Hyatt, "From Homogeneous to a Heterogeneous Unit Principle," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (April 2014): 226–32.

[33] There is a subtle but important distinction here. When people are part of church that is for "people like them", then it becomes easy to assume it is only for people who fit into the particular cultural mold. For example, a Japanese friend was trying to reach out to unchurched Japanese international students in San Francisco. He was reprimanded by the pastor of the Japanese church for inviting these Japanese students. The church had grown comfortable with their congregation of first-generation Japanese Americans and were not interested in reaching other Japanese.

[34] Francis M. DuBose, *How Churches Grow in an Urban World* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1978), 69.

[35] Eloise Hiebert Meneses views this as a gospel issue: "New Testament churches were assemblies associated with place, not ethnicity, bringing together diverse peoples and requiring them to submit to Christ, as to the head of a household. There is evidence that

others worked hard to bring those of different ethnic identities together in the newly started churches. It seems that it would have been more natural to plant homogeneous churches in a city like Antioch, which was segregated in ethnic enclaves. Antioch was estimated to have had 18 ethnic enclaves or quarters within it and was noted for continual ethnic tensions.[36] Instead of homogeneous churches in Antioch, we see ethnic diversity in the church's leadership (Acts 13:1).

A better way to think about church planting in diverse cities is to consider planting language-specific, culturally dynamic churches. Every church should seek to welcome any who might come. A church planter can never successfully plant enough homogeneous churches for all of the different cultures and subcultures of a city. Rather, planting culturally diverse churches in all of the languages of the city can at least provide access to everyone in the city. Therefore, it is important to plant churches, in many languages, that are contextualized to reach diverse urban populations.

Urban Churches as Contextually Urban

There are features of living in a city that shape those living in cities. These features even affect animals. Research has shown that birds change when they are in an urban context for long.[37] If cities change birds, think how

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contemporary attempts to form multi-cultural churches out of a liberal political agenda ironically become enmeshed in power struggles. But those that recognize the centrality of the gospel succeed due to the adoption of a central authority, Christ himself, who relativizes all ethnic and national identities in favor of a common purpose, the spread of the gospel to others who have not heard it." Eloise Hiebert Meneses, "Transnational Identities and the Church: Examining Contemporary Ethnicity and Place," *Mission Studies* 29, no. 1 (2012): 62–78; David E. Stevens, *God's New Humanity: A Biblical Theology of Multiethnicity for the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2012); Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 409–10.

[36] Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal, Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force … .* (HarperOne, 1997), 160.

[37] P. D. Smith, *City: A Guidebook for the Urban Age* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2012), 78.

much cities change people. The church cannot ignore these changes. It has too often been the case that churches in the city operate like rural enclaves, trying to maintain tradition and guard established convention.[38] To maintain way of life is a hallmark of village life. This mindset impacts churches in the city planted with those who have recently arrived in the city. These churches are needed in the city, but they have a tendency to guard against any changes. Unfortunately, these churches struggle to resonate with urban dwellers accustomed to a layered and undulating cultural matrix.

In the rest of the article, I suggest a few ways in which the city shapes people and point to opportunities to plant the church in urban soil. In an article of this length, I can only highlight a few key thoughts. These brief examples serve to demonstrate that a thorough reflection on the nature of urban culture and the shape of the church is greatly needed.

Urban Rhythms

Time is one of the most coveted commodities for city dwellers. In many global cities in Asia, it is normal to be at the office for twelve hours. When we lived in the Greater Los Angeles area, many of our neighbors had two-hour commutes to work each direction. The lack of available time for city dwellers has implications for the urban church.

In the previous issue of this journal, Anthony Witten described a church he had a part in planting. It was not his goal to describe the choices the core team made to contextualize the church, but he hinted at a contextual reality that surfaces in nearly every serious discussion about urban church life. Their church is composed of urban professionals who have very little time that is not gobbled up by work or family obligations. Therefore, the

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[38] Alex G. Smith, "Some Historical Views on Asian Urban Extension: Complexities of Urban and Rural Relationships," in *Communicating Christ in Asian Cities: Urban Issues in Buddhist Contexts*, ed. Paul H. De Neui (Pasadena, CA: W. Carey Library, 2009), 32; Hiebert and Meneses, *Incarnational Ministry*, 325.

church leadership decided to do as much as they can on Sundays.[39] Some city center churches use lunch times as a spiritual touchpoint. Those working in service sector jobs may only be able to worship at night.[40]

Urban Choice

One of the most significant changes that has accompanied globally connected urbanization is the elevated role of choice in daily life. For most of human history, people navigated life with few choices. Their work, spouse, clothing, food, education were all *pro forma*. Today, the urban dweller chooses nearly everything. Clothing, music, food, career, friends, education, and even identity are chosen and curated by the individual. People are hardwired to anticipate choices, including choices about matters of faith. Conflict surfaces when church leaders presume members are obligated to do what they say. Urbanites, especially younger ones, will find a faith community that allows for them to make choices.[41] This poses a challenge for an urban church. Certainly, a church built on consumerism is not compatible with the gospel. Nevertheless, an urban church needs to acknowledge that people are accustomed to making choices. Churches should adjust accordingly. We need churches that are simultaneously biblically faithful and contextualized for our urban audiences.[42]

Urban Space

Another aspect of urban living is the lack of space. Urban space is contested space. There is not enough road space for all the vehicles, and urban land is the most expensive because it is the most sought after. This means

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[39] Anthony Witten, "Making the Most of the Gathered Church: How A Church's Liturgy Shapes Spiritual Formation and Growth," *Great Commission Baptist Journal of Missions* 2, no. 1 (May 2023): 1.

[40] In one Southeast Asian city migrant workers gather to worship at 10:30pm because many work until 10pm.

[41] This assumption stems from an era where a pastor had a presumed respectability and authority in the community.

[42] Michael Crane, *Urbanizing the Church in an Urbanizing Asia, Urbanization: Impacts on the Church, Mission and Society Today*, 2018, 116.

an urban church needs to maximize space as much as possible. This also means location is more important than the cost or rental of a space. Urban churches need to establish spaces that are findable, accessible, and welcoming.[43] Storefronts are set on the sidewalk with large windows and clear advertising about what one might find if they enter. This is to put the potential shopper as well as the passerby at ease. When a dedicated church space is visually closed off to the passerby and closed six days of the week, it sends unintended messages that the church is creepy or irrelevant.

Urban Worldview(s)

Cities change people irrevocably. If someone is raised in a rural community and all they know are people who are similar culturally and believe the same things, their worldview is more predictable and set. If that same person is raised in a city with frequent interactions with people of different cultures, speaking different languages, and committed to various beliefs, their worldview is likely to be complex and layered. Even an urban congregation full of people raised in Christian families is influenced by many outside ideas, some of which are contradictory to a Christian worldview. Preaching, teaching and discipleship will need to be persistent and incisive, in order to counteract the "defeater beliefs"[44] that sneak in through other influences. Rather than being reactive to cultural and social issues, the urban church needs to find ways to be proactive in shaping people in Christlikeness using the language and culture of the city.

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[43] Linda Bergquist and Michael D. Crane, *City Shaped Churches: Planting Churches in a Global Era* (Pasadena, CA: Urban Loft Publishers, 2018), 132.

[44] Defeater beliefs are described by Tim Keller as: "beliefs of the culture that lead listeners to find some Christian doctrines implausible or overtly offensive."B" beliefs contradict Christian truth directly at points we may call "B" doctrines." Timothy J. Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 123.

Urban Churches as Transcultural Hubs

Not only does the urban church need to contextualize to current realities of urban people, but it also has an opportunity to display a transcultural community centered around the One who demolished the barriers that perpetuate ethnic enmity. The choice of *transcultural* is intentional. To be cross-cultural or intercultural is merely to navigate between cultures. To be transcultural is to transcend the boundaries of cultures, acknowledging a richness that comes from diversity as well as an innate humanity common to all people.[45]

The New Testament indicates the church displays the gospel when diverse peoples converge as "one new humanity" (Eph. 2:15). Historian Andrew Walls sees the transcultural nature of the church as paradigmatic:

> It is to be repeated as people separated by language, history and culture recognize each other in Christ. And the recognition is not based on one adopting the ways of thought and behaviour and expression, however sanctified, of the other; that is Judaizing, and another Gospel. Christ must rule in the minds of his people; which means extending his dominion over those corporate structures of thought that constitute a culture. The very act of doing so must sharpen the identity of those who share a culture. The faith of Christ is infinitely translatable, it creates 'a place to feel at home.' But it must not make a place where we are so much at home that no one else can live there.[46]

Cities draw all kinds of people. While people attempt to use cities for their own achievements, the city uses them at the same time. Urban life can

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[45] Will Baker, "From Intercultural to Transcultural Communication," *Language and Intercultural Communication* 22, no. 3 (2022): 180.

[46] Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 25.

be draining and even dehumanizing. The urban church has an opportunity to engage people in their respective cultural locations. But, this is not intended to be in isolated homogeneous efforts.[47] As we have already seen earlier in the article, cities are far too culturally complex to be meaningfully reached by a smattering of culturally homogenous churches.[48] Rather, we need churches that prioritize dynamic cultural engagement.

Christian leaders are beginning to identify the increasing need to engage people with culturally complex identities. One mission organization has begun running cultural intelligence seminars, recognizing our churches are struggling to engage with people outside of their own cultural enclave.

Stephan Tan, who pastors Regeneration Church in the hyper-diverse city of Melbourne, Australia, notes the many cultures colliding and rubbing against one another. He says:

> Transculturalism seems more realistic, someone moves from another country, they lose some aspects of their home culture and hold onto other aspects. Everyone brings something of their culture and loses something of their culture. Every culture is beautiful and broken. What standard do we use to examine culture? Scripture. In the church, have a goal of cultural intelligence. Conflict resolution can be challenging, particularly saving face. Everyone needs to understand multiple cultures that have influence in the broader culture. A key category is alienation (not discarding oppression or injustice), the reversal of Babel. Try to bring diverse leaders together to work together on ministry/theological issues. Goal is to get them to work together on

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[47] This does not mean there are no culturally isolated enclaves. For some, the battle to find their identity means turning back to a strong ethnic identity. But even in doing this, the identity is chosen and shaped. This means even the robustly monocultural identity went through a process of selection from the many cultural choices.

[48] There will be homogenous churches, particularly when it comes to languages. But no church should be content with reaching one particular culture or people group (Matt 28:18-20).

this, which gets them into deeper understanding of each other's culture.[49]

Tan moves beyond a superficial reduction of culture as language, food, and music preferences. He deploys theological categories in order for those in his congregation to develop an identity in Christ that makes space cultural expression. Moreover, thinking in terms of alienation helps draw people together around the gospel, rather than pitting cultures against each other. Tan recognized that the language of oppression or injustice might encourage division, whereas alienation is able to address social as well as spiritual brokenness simultaneously.[50]

More work needs to be done in this area. When urban churches are contextualizing rightly, we will see a new generation of well-discipled urban Christians who will then disciple the next generation. With more than four billion urban dwellers, this issue deserves our attention.

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[49] Stephen Tan, Interview with author, Zoom, April 25, 2023.

[50] Tan offers further explanation in a sermon on race and the gospel. The Tower of Babel account shows a separation of peoples resulting from disordered priorities. Alienation occurs even when specific acts of racism do not. Christ's death on the cross brought reconciliation that would address the alienation between people and God as well as between different groups of people. Stephen Tan, "Race- The Image of God- Nov 17, 2020," Inner West Sermons, accessed August 19, 2023, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/inner-west-sermons/id1641221641?i=1000577055898.

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