Faithful in the Complexity:
The Challenge and Necessity of Contextualization in Global Cities

Jon Staples

Global Cities

It is no secret that the world is becoming more urban. Estimates show that almost 70% of the world will live in a metropolitan area by 2050.[1] Not only is the world moving to cities, but it is continuing to become more global. Although COVID-19 temporarily may have slowed globalization, three years later, globalization is again growing with the advent of new technology and further interconnectedness.[2] The future of our world is both a global and an urban one.[3] As globalization and urbanization continue to grow, global cities are emerging.

---

[1] United Nations, *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision* (New York: United Nations, 2019).

[2] Afshin Molavi, "Is Globalization Rising Once Again? The UAE Minister for Foreign Trade Outlines His Ambitious Vision for Future Trade Growth," *The Wilson Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (March 22, 2023).

[3] Michael D Crane, "Emerging Global Cities and the Tilt of Influence," *Radius Global*, 2020.

Kearney, the leading firm analyzing the global cities of the world, defines global cities as those that are "uniquely international in their connectivity and character."[4] The migration of people worldwide to cities and the rise of globalization have created a new phenomenon of the global city. Though cities have existed for thousands of years, the global interconnectedness and size of cities on today's scale have not been around long. As Richard Longworth points out, global cities as they exist today have been around for only about 30 years, and they are becoming more significant and globally connected daily.[5] Urbanization and globalization are causing the world's cities to change rapidly.

As workers seeking to see healthy churches planted everywhere and among every people, missionaries will find themselves more and more in the world's global cities. This is why the IMB has made one of its 2025 goals to have plans to engage 75 global cities comprehensively.[6] These cities, however, are complex environments for carrying out the missionary task, especially when one considers contextualization. The complexity of the global city means that carrying out the missionary task in these cities requires thoughtful and intentional contextualization with the impact of globalization and the diversity of these cities in mind. Given these new realities in cities, our approach requires us to reexamine our practice of contextualization. The message is the same, the church is the same, and yet the contexts are changing rapidly. In today's rapidly changing world, contextualization plays a crucial role in mission in cosmopolitan global cities.

---

[4] Kearney, "Readiness for the Storm--the 2022 Global Cities Report," 2022.

[5] R.C. Longworth, *On Global Cities* (Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2015), https://global affairs.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/On_Global_Cities.pdf.

[6] "IMB Fights Cruel Realities in Global Cities - IMB," accessed July 12, 2023, https://www.im b.org/2021/08/04/imb-fights-cruel-realities-global-cities/.

Contextualization

Before thinking about contextualization in global cities, it is essential to examine the meaning of contextualization. Dean Flemming explains, "Contextualization has to do with how the gospel revealed in Scripture authentically comes to life in each new cultural, social, religious and historical setting."[7] In this definition, contextualization is a process that occurs throughout the whole task of missions. It is not limited to evangelism only since being faithful to the "gospel revealed in Scripture" and seeing it lived out authentically happens throughout the missionary task. . Likewise, Will Brooks defines contextualization as "considering the ways the message of Scripture can be explained, understood, or lived out in a specific context."[8] The key here is that contextualization involves everything from communication to the practical application of the gospel in a particular context.

Contextualization is about living and communicating faithfully, thoughtfully, and intentionally in a specific context. To do this kind of contextualization, the missionary must know the context. In urban missions, Michael Crane suggests that to contextualize faithfully, the church planter must know their city geographically, demographically, historically, culturally, and religiously.[9] Doing this work requires much study and living among the city's people. Far too often, missionaries assume they know a particular context after living there for a significant period. Conversely, contextualization requires a lifetime of learning.

Tim Keller points out that these efforts to contextualize have one goal: the gospel proclaimed to people "in language and forms they can comprehend, and through appeals and arguments with force they can feel, even

---

[7] Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2005), Kindle Locations 46-47.

[8] Will Brooks, *Interpreting Scripture Across Cultures: An Introduction to Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2022), 64.

[9] Michael D Crane, "Know Your City: Urban Exegesis with Church Planting in Mind," *Radius Global,* n.d.

if they reject them."[10] Therefore, the missionary seeking to do faithful contextualization is constantly learning about his or her context and always thinking about new ways to communicate the truths of Scripture faithfully. This is what contextualization aims for, but why is it necessary to consider contextualization in the global city in particular?

The Complexity of Contextualization in Global Cities

Contextualization is difficult in any context. It is challenging to enter a place and then learn the culture, history, language, and communication methods. Doing so requires years of hard work. However, there are several reasons that the complexity of contextualization is intensified in global cities.

Diversity

First, global cities are diverse. They tend to be diverse ethnically, socioeconomically, linguistically, and culturally.[11] For example, much of the population of Singapore is of Malay, Chinese, and Indian descent, but there is significant ethnic diversity even among these groups.[12] In London, 1.83 million people speak a language other than English at home.[13] Of the 7 million people in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia's largest city, 48% are expatriates from around the world.[14]

This diversity adds to the complexity of contextualization in global cities.

---

[10] Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*, 89.

[11] Longworth, *On Global Cities*.

[12] "Singapore - Multicultural, Diverse, Cosmopolitan," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed July 14, 2023, https://www.britannica.com/place/Singapore/The-people.

[13] London, "Census 2021 Reports," accessed July 14, 2023, https://apps.london.gov.uk/census-2021-reports/#/main-language-ep.

[14] Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, "Population Size - GASTAT Portal," Saudi Census, accessed July 14, 2023, https://portal.saudicensus.sa/portal/public/1/15/45?type=DASHBOARD.

As Crane points out, much of the missions community's focus has been on "ethnic based contextualization" in recent years.[15] Since the advent of people group missiology, much of cross-cultural missionary work has focused on groups that are more homogenous ethnically.[16] However, the global cities of today are anything but homogenous. The late Tim Keller, who spent much of his life thinking about contextualization in the city, proclaims that cities are "filled with ironic, edgy, diversity-loving people who have a high tolerance for ambiguity and disorder."[17] This diversity complicates contextualization, especially when missionary training is often suited toward those going to homogenous environments where most people come from the same ethnicity, speak the same language, and have a similar culture.

In more homogenous environments, missionaries can often create tools and ways of explaining the gospel that resonate with a large population group. Instead, Keller claims Christians must be "committed to the complexity" of faithful contextualization in diverse cities. Therefore, they must realize "there is no 'one size fits all' method or message that can be used with all urban residents."[18] Keller realizes that the city's diversity requires various approaches to seeing the gospel and church flourish in the city context. This level of complexity requires thoughtfulness in recognizing the diversity of the city.

---

[15] Michael D Crane, "To the Ends of the Earth through Strategic Urban Centers: Reexamining the Missions Mandate in Light of the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament," in *Advancing Models of Mission: Evaluating the Past and Looking to the Future*, Evangelical Missiological Society Series 29, 2021, 17.

[16] John Mark Terry and Jervis David Payne, *Developing a Strategy for Missions (Encountering Mission): A Biblical, Historical, and Cultural Introduction*, Encountering Mission (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013), 114-123. As the authors point out, a focus on people groups originated with Donald McGavren and the Church Growth Movement in the 1950s. McGavren called for "people movements" and ethnically homogenous churches so that the gospel could spread faster among peoples.

[17] Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*, 173.

[18] Keller, 177.

Globalization

Another distinguishing factor in global cities is the influence of globalization. The Kearny report above shows that global cities have an international flavor. When people migrate with their own language, culture, and worldview to a city and mix with people from other parts of the world, it creates something new and different. This is not to say that globalization is causing traditional or local cultures to cease to exist, but globalization is influencing people's worldviews and perspectives as they are exposed to and interact with people in from other cultural backgrounds.[19] This mutual influence is especially true in cities that have high populations of internationals. New cultures interacting creates a unique and changing culture. This is a challenge as missionaries seek to constantly adapt to new ways of communicating, new ideas in a culture, and changing worldviews.

Do the impacts of globalization and diversity on these cities mean that missionaries and churches do not need to think about contextualization? Absolutely not. Although these factors intensify the complexity of contextualization, they also demand more intentionality and thoughtfulness from the missionary. Although globalization and the mixing of cultures are influencing peoples and places across the globe, people still come to the gospel and Scriptures with their own unique worldview influenced by their culture. This means that even though a group of people speak the same language and live in the same community, they may ask questions, communicate, and hear things differently. Therefore, pastors, missionaries, and church planters in global cities must not assume that the impact of globalization flattens the city's culture, but they must instead engage people thoughtfully and intentionally, recognizing the diversity and global cultural influences at play.

---

[19] Netland and Ott, *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity.*, 11.

The United Arab Emirates: A Complex Example

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a small country of about 10 million people on the Arabian Peninsula.[20] The UAE has experienced globalization and urbanization like the rest of the world, but at a record pace. For example, 87% of the UAE is now urban, while 50 years ago, the cities of the UAE were small villages.[21] The two largest cities today, Abu Dhabi and Dubai, were ranked 9th and 11th on the Kearney Global Cities Outlook looking at the future of the world's global cities.[22] There are over 100 languages widely spoken in the UAE, with more than 200 nationalities present.[23] This means that the cities of the UAE are filled with people who speak Arabic, Hindi, Russian, English, Afrikaans, Urdu, Dari, and more. The world has come to Dubai and Abu Dhabi. However, most people living in the UAE are still from unreached peoples.[24]

The impact of diversity and globalization is evident upon first arrival in Dubai or Abu Dhabi. If one tries to order food in Arabic in most parts of either city, they will be met with a blank stare because much of the food service industry does not speak Arabic. Instead, English is the lingua franca, with most of daily life, from commerce to education, occurring in English.

---

[20] UAE Government, "Population and Demographic Mix," accessed July 14, 2023, https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/social-affairs/preserving-the-emirati-national-identity/population-and-demographic-mix.

[21] World Bank, "World Bank Open Data," World Bank Open Data, accessed July 14, 2023, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS?locations=AE.

[22] Kearney, "2022 Global Cities Report | Steering between Storms," 2022, https://www.kearney.com/industry/public-sector/global-cities/2022#.

[23] UAE Government, "Fact Sheet," The Official Portal of the UAE Government, accessed July 14, 2023, https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/fact-sheet.

[24] PeopleGroups.org, "PeopleGroups.Org - United Arab Emirates," accessed July 14, 2023, https://peoplegroups.org/explore/CountryDetails.aspx?genc0=ARE#topmenu.

There has even been a unique English dialect emerging in the Gulf cities called Gulf English.[25]

Even young Emiratis, the citizens of the UAE, are multilingual. For young Emiratis, speaking English and Emirati Arabic is not only typical but also expected.[26] However, one would be incorrect to assume that all ministry in these cities can be done in English. Though English may be the overall lingua franca of the cities, different neighborhoods often have their own preferred language. For example, in the Mussafah neighborhood of Abu Dhabi, the lingua franca is the South Asian language of Urdu, while the lingua franca of the Bani Yas neighborhood is Gulf Arabic. Not only do lingua francas vary throughout the cities, but they vary from person to person according to what language someone prefers to speak.[27]

To the praise of God alone, the church is also growing in the UAE.[28] Much of the growth has been in English-speaking, multi-cultural churches.[29] These churches tend to be very diverse, just like their surrounding contexts, often with 30+ nationalities in the congregation. However, as mentioned previously, many of the peoples and places of these cities are still unreached, having few to no churches among them.

---

[25] Peter Siemund, Ahmad Al-Issa, and Jakob R. E. Leimgruber, "Multilingualism and the Role of English in the United Arab Emirates.," *World Englishes* 40, no. 2 (June 2021): 191–204.

[26] Sarah Hopkyns, Wafa Zoghbor, and Peter John Hassall, "The Use of English and Linguistic Hybridity among Emirati Millennials.," *World Englishes* 40, no. 2 (June 2021): 176–90.

[27] Siemund, Al-Issa, and Leimgruber, "Multilingualism and the Role of English in the United Arab Emirates."

[28] Aubrey Sequeira, "Global Christianity Needs a Reformation," *Journal of Global Christianity* 5, no. 1 (2019): 4–15.

[29] Dave Furman and Scott Zeller, "International Churches," *Journal of Global Christianity* 3, no. 1 (2017): 91–100.

Thoughtful and Intentional Contextualization in the UAE

What does faithful contextualization look like in the global cities of the UAE? It takes intentionality and thoughtfulness. Though many examples are possible, three will be given from evangelistic, discipling, and church health perspectives.

Take the example of an evangelistic Bible study in Arabic. Some that would be a part of the group may have grown up in traditional families who spoke often of God's judgment. This could be very different than the Bible's portrayal of God and his judgement. Therefore, they may come to the Scriptures with some understanding of sin and judgement, however wrong it may be. Yet others may have grown up in families where more of a light universalism was taught with the idea that all religions are basically the same and good. These Arabic speakers might have no concept of sin and God's judgment. It will require thoughtfulness to address the questions that each of these Arabs comes to the Scriptures with and to faithfully help them see the reality of sin and God's judgment in the Bible. Even though they both speak the same language and are from the same culture, both individuals have grown up with different worldviews that require a unique approach to helping them understand the gospel.

Another example is one of discipling two new believers. One comes from a Gulf Arab background, and one comes from a Western European culture. The Gulf Arab assumes that sex outside of marriage is wrong because of his cultural background and family upbringing. However, the Western European, growing up in a secular environment, assumes sex outside marriage is morally acceptable. As these two believers approach the Bible and what it says about sexual immorality, they will come with different assumptions and questions. The discipler must intentionally address these cultural assumptions that each brings to the table. This will most likely involve bringing up the issue sooner with the Western European. In either case, it involves a different intentional plan for discipleship.

There is also a multitude of issues related to healthy church. For example, consider an English-speaking Baptist church comprised of East Asians, Africans, Arabs, South Asians, Europeans, and Americans. As Baptists, this church values the voice of the whole congregation and the priesthood of all believers. The leadership hopes to see the entire congregation using their gifts to build up the body, interpreting the Bible for themselves, and teaching one another. Yet, some of its community are from an East Asian context where submission to authority is highly valued. Therefore, some members from that context may hesitate to speak up, teach others, or question the church's leadership.[30]

Faithful contextualization seeks to tackle this issue by helping the members from the East Asian context see how they can and should learn to read and interpret the Bible themselves. Yet, this takes intentionality from the leadership. It would be easy for a leader from a non-East Asian context to overlook this issue. As seen in this example, even in English-speaking international churches, contextualization becomes an important issue. Cultural and communication issues arise as people from diverse backgrounds with different communication styles live in community with one another.

Using the definition above from Brooks about the message of Scripture being "lived out in a context," what might contextualization look like in the global cities of the UAE? It will be complex and diverse. It will take healthy, multi-cultural churches in Arabic, English, Hindi, Urdu, Afrikaans, Taglog, Pashtu, and more. It will take missionaries willing to address questions about the deity of Christ from an Arab Muslim and later that same day address an issue from a gospel perspective about a witch doctor from an animistic sub-Saharan African. It will take church planting-churches among the men of labor camps and the uber-wealthy.

---

[30] Paul Luo, "Congregationalism for a Church Plant in the Confucian Culture," *The Great Commission Baptist Journal of Missions* 2, no. 1 (May 1, 2023), https://serials.atla.com/gcbjm/article/view/3244.

All of this must be done with thoughtfulness and intentionality to address the contextual issues of each person in the city. This kind of contextualization must look to each individual person's background, culture, and worldview, as contextualization "does not begin with statistics or assumptions; it begins with people."[31] Contextualization in the UAE is complex, and it challenges our usual assumptions about how to contextualize. It must be done faithfully, intentionally, and thoughtfully.

Conclusion

This article has argued that contextualization in global cities, though complex, is essential and requires both intentionality and thoughtfulness with the diversity and impact of globalization in mind. This argument does not involve a "how-to" approach to contextualization in these cosmopolitan environments but instead calls for thoughtful and intentional contextualization with the impact of globalization and the diversity of these cities in mind.

The reality is that our thinking on contextualization must be adapted to our new globalized world. This new reality may not fit into many of our current missiological categories of contextualization. Our thinking and practice must reflect the diversity and interaction across ethnic and cultural lines that occur daily in our world, especially in cosmopolitan cities.

The IMB Foundation document states, "The gospel can make itself at home in any culture, while challenging and transforming every culture."[32] The gospel that is for everyone can make its home everywhere. The gospel is good news for the world's most diverse cities. All of history is moving forward toward a new global city with people from all tribes, languages, and nations. Though complex, we must seek to see the gospel flourish in the

---

[31] Wade Stephens et al., *Tradecraft : For the Church on Mission.*, 1st ed. (Urban Loft Publishers, 2013), 155.

[32] International Mission Board, "Foundations" (IMB Training, June 10, 2022), 55, https://issuu.com/trainingdev/docs/imb_foundations.

cosmopolitan cities of today. Contextualization in a global city is a difficult task. However, faithfulness to the Great Commission requires it. It requires intentional life-long learning of the cultures of your city. For God's glory, may the global age be filled with faithful Christians willing to do the hard work of seeing the gospel preached and the church flourish in the context of the world's global cities.

Further Study

> *Center Church*, Tim Keller
> https://radiusglobal.org/resources

References

Crane, Michael D. "Emerging Global Cities and the Tilt of Influence." *Radius Global*, 2020.

———. "Know Your City: Urban Exegesis with Church Planting in Mind." *Radius Global*, n.d.

———. "To the Ends of the Earth through Strategic Urban Centers: Reexamining the Missions Mandate in Light of the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament." In *Advancing Models of Mission: Evaluating the Past and Looking to the Future*, 97–113. Evangelical Missiological Society Series 29, 2021.

Flemming, Dave. *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2005.

Furman, Dave, and Scott Zeller. "International Churches." *Journal of Global Christianity* 3, no. 1 (2017): 91–100.

Hopkyns, Sarah, Wafa Zoghbor, and Peter John Hassall. "The Use of English and Linguistic Hybridity among Emirati Millennials." *World Englishes* 40, no. 2 (June 2021): 176–90.

"IMB Fights Cruel Realities in Global Cities - IMB." Accessed July 12, 2023. https://www.imb.org/2021/08/04/imb-fights-cruel-realities-global-cities/.

International Mission Board. "Foundations." IMB Training, June 10, 2022. https://issuu.com/trainingdev/docs/imb_foundations.

Kearney. "2022 Global Cities Report | Steering between Storms," 2022. https://www.kearney.com/industry/public-sector/global-cities/2022#.

———. "Readiness for the Storm--the 2022 Global Cities Report," 2022.

Keller, Timothy. *Center Church : Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City.* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2012.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. "Population Size - GASTAT Portal." Saudi Census. Accessed July 14, 2023. https://portal.saudicensus.sa/portal/public/1/15/45?type=DASHBOARD.

London. "Census 2021 Reports." Accessed July 14, 2023. https://apps.london.gov.uk/census-2021-reports/#/main-language-ep.

Longworth, R.C. *On Global Cities.* Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2015. https://globalaffairs.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/On_Global_Cities.pdf.

Luo, Paul. "Congregationalism for a Church Plant in the Confucian Culture." *The Great Commission Baptist Journal of Missions* 2, no. 1 (May 1, 2023). https://serials.atla.com/gcbjm/article/view/3244.

Molavi, Afshin. "Is Globalization Rising Once Again? The UAE Minister for Foreign Trade Outlines His Ambitious Vision for Future Trade Growth." *The Wilson Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (March 22, 2023).

Netland, Harold A., and Craig Ott. *Globalizing Theology : Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity.* Baker Academic, 2006.

PeopleGroups.org. "PeopleGroups.Org - United Arab Emirates." Accessed July 14, 2023. https://peoplegroups.org/explore/CountryDetails.aspx?genc0=ARE#topmenu.

Sequeira, Aubrey. "Global Christianity Needs a Reformation." *Journal of Global Christianity* 5, no. 1 (2019): 4–15.

Siemund, Peter, Ahmad Al-Issa, and Jakob R. E. Leimgruber. "Multilingualism and the Role of English in the United Arab Emirates." *World Englishes* 40, no. 2 (June 2021): 191–204.

"Singapore - Multicultural, Diverse, Cosmopolitan." In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Accessed July 14, 2023. https://www.britannica.com/place/Singapore/The-people.

Stephens, Wade, Rodney Calfee, Larry McCrary, and Caleb Crider. *Tradecraft : For the Church on Mission.* Portland, Oregon: Urban Loft Publishers, 2013.

Terry, John Mark, and Jervis David Payne. *Developing a Strategy for Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Cultural Introduction.* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013. http://aaron.swbts.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=636853&site=eds-live.

UAE Government. "Fact Sheet." The Official Portal of the UAE Government. Accessed July 14, 2023. https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/fact-sheet.

———. "Population and Demographic Mix." Accessed July 14, 2023. https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/social-affairs/preserving-the-emirati-national-identity/population-and-demographic-mix.

United Nations. *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision.* New York: United Nations, 2019.

Will Brooks. *Interpreting Scripture Across Cultures : An Introduction to Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics.* Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2022.

World Bank. "World Bank Open Data." World Bank Open Data. Accessed July 14, 2023. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS?locations=AE.

Jon and his wife Joanna have been serving in the Middle East for the past 5 years. They lead a team of missionaries focused on a global city in the Middle East and serve at an international church. Jon has an Mdiv from Southern Seminary and is currently a PhD student at SWBTS.