

Contextualization of the Word in a Diverse World

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The world has grown dramatically that could be unimaginable among those who lived one thousand years ago. In the year 1000, the aggregate population of the top 10 cities that include Cordova, Kaifeng, Constantinople, Angkor, Kyoto, Cairo, Baghdad, Nishapur, Hasa and Anhvada was only 2.14 million. In 2015, the total population of the top ten cities is projected to be 205.8 million, about 10,000% increase. In 1900, eight of the most populated cities were from the west: London, New York, Paris, Berlin, Chicago, Vienna, Manchester and Philadelphia. The other two are Tokyo and St. Petersburg. This trend is reversed in 2015, where it is expected that the most populated cities will be coming from the east, specifically from less developed countries (Table 1).

Table 1. Population of the world's largest metropolitan areas

in 1900, 2000, and 2015 (millions)

1990

2000

2015

Cities

Population

Cities

Population

Cities

Population

London

6.5

Tokyo

34.5

Tokyo

35.5

New York

4.2

Mexico City

18.1

Mumbai

21.9

Paris

3.3

New York

17.9

Mexico City

21.6

Berlin

2.7

Sao Paulo

17.1

Sao Paolo

20.5

Chicago

1.7

Mumbai

16.1

New York

19.9

Vienna

1.7

Shanghai

13.2

Delhi

18.6

Tokyo

1.5

Kolkata

13.1

Shanghai

17.2

St. Petersburg

1.4

Delhi

12.4

Kolkata

17.0

Manchester

1.4

Buenos Aires

11.9

Dhaka

16.8

Philadelphia

1.4

Los Angeles-Long Beach- Santa Ana

11.8

Jakarta

16.8

Source: The World Bank 2007. 07 World Development Indicators citing O? Meara 1999.

United Nations Population Division, 2005, World Prospects: The 2005 Revision.

By 2015, it is projected that there would be 7.1 billion people on earth, more than half of them would most probably be living in urban areas since 49% of the population in 2005 are already urban population. From 1990 to 2005, it took 15 years to have additional one billion people. From 2005 to

2015, it is projected that there would be 0.7 billion more people in just ten years (Table 2).

Table 2. World and Urban population, 1990, 2005, 2015

Year

Total World Population

Urban Population

Percentage Urban

1990

5,256.3 M

2,253.0 M

43

2005

6,437.7 M

3,128.3 M

49

2015

7,165.8 M

Source: The World Bank 2007. 07 World Development Indicators

The fast growth of the population and urbanization gives rise to greater complexity of the modern cities, puts stresses on resources and institutions in responding to the multiple human needs and demands, and poses challenges in coping with emerging socio-economic and political relationships and arrangements. The finite world has grown big in population and growth, but it has also become smaller as the space that used to be conquered after years of explorations can now be circled by a traveler in two or three days time. Real time communication has been made possible through advance technology. The globalization of the economy has made small transactions in the peripheries linked to the international economies. Politics encompass relations among nations, wars and conflicts continue, natural disasters transcend national boundaries, climate change is in, poverty prevails.

We have a diverse world. Each city has become more distinct, not just in term of tourism destination but in the way of life of its people. Post modernism characterized by relativism, deconstruction, and plurality has gained grounds and affecting the perspectives and programs of individuals, institutions and nations. Christianity that used to be just Roman Catholicism and Protestantism has no longer monopoly of the belief in Christ, as new faith groups emerge, claiming Christ as well. Within the ?born-again? followers of Christ, a variety of church organizations, ministries, methods of services and mission strategies exist.

The ?mission field? that used to connote a remote, distant and ?uncivilized? world has changed significantly. Now, the mission field is right within a distance, in one?s home, workplaces and communities- in a place that can be so modern and affluent, or distressed neighborhood where the

people mire in poverty. Amidst all these complexities, how do we plunge in an urban mission in a post- modern era?

One can get confused. One can get lost in this urban mace. Many did. We do not one to become one.

Urban missiologist, author, professor and a senior associate of the large cities for the Laussane Committee for World Evangelization Ray Bakke argues that:

Developing a theology of the city is one of the ways to survive in urban ministry? of all pastoral survival strategies the most important is the development of a world view ? an understanding big enough to see what God is doing in urbanization of his world and the internationalizing of his cities (Bakke 1987;62).

Cities are sacred places. One has to love the city if he is to work here. Praying for the cities is biblically authorized. Believers in the city can help preserve it and despite the millions of people in the city, God can find the believers, His people (Bakke 1987;62-65).

The need to see the dynamic interplay of the cities, the believers and the Word brings one to the concern for contextualization.

A recent study (Rice 2010) on how theologians and practitioners in a developing country view contextualization by pointing out its elements summarized as follows:

Elements of Contextualization
Cultural/context: the church is in touch with their own context: history, culture, social settings, needs
Biblically centered and accountable to the Word
Self-theologizing where everyone freely articulates their own faith, led by the holy spirit, and all are ministers
Transformational: the Gospel is truly incarnate in the community so that it transforms the context
Self-determining, including leadership and discipleship
Aware of your own culture, beliefs, and values
A message that connects with the whole community, presenting a clear biblical message with the correct philosophy so that the community experiences the reality of salvation
Community living out their own theology
The Gospel comes from the community

How to do contextualization? The task ??is the essence of urban reflection and action. The challenge is to remain faithful to the historic text of the Scriptures while being mindful of today?s? realities (Smith 2006). The steps are: Establishing what the Text meant at the time it was written: what it meant ?then?. Creating the bridge to explore how the text is understood in meaningful terms for the interpreters today: what it could mean ?now?. Determining the meaning and application for those who will receive the message in their particular circumstances (Smith 2006, citing Hiebert 1987).

Am sure there have been experiences and cases on how believers worked with the cities in a more contextualized manner, making the Word more relevant and appropriate to the city people being addressed. I remember attending a prayer conference in Hongkong in 1995. The venue was a former camp of the Vietnamese refugees and we had to make do with the facilities for accommodation. In the middle of one of the sessions came a long haired Caucasian guy with full beard and mustache, wearing a bright yellow mid-leg pants with matching yellow and black vest, with a lot of pendants, and if I remember right with earrings as well. He was wearing a sandal and with a Bible in his hand. He reminded me of the hippies in the 1960s and I wondered why he was made up like that. By late afternoon, I just realized that he was my roommate and I could not control my curiosity and asked him why he was in that attire. He said and this is not the exact words ?I am a missionary among the youth in the streets of ____ (a city in Germany) who are into drugs and gang conflicts. I have to be ?like? them if I have to be with them. If I will come in long sleeves and tie, they will surely run the

moment they see me coming.?

That moment, I remembered Jesus who went around Jerusalem in sandals, long-haired, dressed in robes and in the company of the sinners. The world will know the Word through us, and the Word is in us in action.

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