

# Outward-facing, life-affirming and well-informed: only the best will serve our cities

Author: Rod Green

Date: 25.08.2010

Category: Urban Mission

The strategic power and potential of cities was clearly demonstrated by Paul's strategy of focusing on urban evangelism in his journey from Athens, to Corinth, to Ephesus, to Rome. This is part of the longer biblical journey from the Garden of Eden in Genesis to the City of God in Revelation. We need a better understanding of why the Bible story is framed in this way, from rural idyll to urban perfection.

Around 500 cities of 1m+ inhabitants have appeared in the last 150 years. The top 100 cities ranked by GDP account for around 25% of global GDP. They have more in common with each other than with their own countries. Tokyo, New York, London, Paris, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Hong Kong may claim membership of this club. São Paulo, Shanghai, Seoul, Moscow, Mumbai and Istanbul amongst others are knocking on the door.

In the 20th century the global population rose from 1.6 to 6.5bn and is expected to peak at around 11bn later this century. Migration to cities is estimated to grow to 75% of the world population by 2050, from 25% in 1950. Cities will become the defining feature of human habitation.

Cities are great for learning, creativity and innovation. They offer scope for connectedness and exchange. They are the only prospect of sustainable living for mushrooming populations. Cities concentrate a wonderfully rich diversity of culture and language. London is home to 250+ languages and their profile constantly changes reflecting aspirations and adversities across the globe. Even within local schools there are high levels of churn as pupils come and go reflecting these changing aspirations at neighbourhood level. Bursting arts, unimaginable food variety, intriguing traditions and festivals all add up to an exceptional quality of life. Incompatible faith convictions, unfamiliar patterns of family life and unexpected attitudes to modesty, age and honour all contribute to the kaleidoscopic colour of urban energy. No wonder that cities are key to reaching the world for any value system. They are the centres of learning and the drivers of economic expansion.

However, the challenges of living with such complexity, dynamism and diversity can paralyse.

Cities ignite change as well as reaction. They push homogeneity as well as diversity. They drive consumption as well as conservation. They may encourage living alone in shallower personal relationships amidst goal-orientated networks. Deprivation and antisocial behaviour thrive. New industries materialise and swallow others. Cities can facilitate fear, fraud, terrorism and pornography. Sexually transmitted infections and pandemics can shroud cities alarmingly swiftly. Our modern world seems to offer us prosperity without security, big brands in weightless organisations and connectedness without intimacy. Buoyed up with opportunities we are weighed down by unpredictability. Politicians claim more and more but control less and less. We are becoming more globalised, more atomised, more urbanised, more commodified - and more mystified.

How should Christian communities respond? With a great sense of privilege and humility.

The greatest challenge to improving the quality of urban living will be satisfying the human longing for intimate friendship with diverse neighbours and with the one true God. This is problematic in the context of religious and secular fundamentalism. The kind of Christian community that will be able to impact burgeoning cities will be characterised by breadth and engagement. They will be communities of people who are outward-facing, life-affirming and well-informed - about the world around them and the Word within them. They will serve their communities at the point of local need for the sake of doing good as citizens. They will participate constructively in local politics, economic activity and

community development. Yet they will remain a point of contradiction - sometimes a scapegoat for hostility - as citizens of another place. They will be gracious and winsome knowing the difference between primary truths and secondary issues.

This kind of Christian community must remain on the front foot. They will need to reach out with an appropriate confidence to their community leaders - particularly the political, faith, business, arts, media and educational leaders who shape the character of the city. Many of these leaders are weighed down by inconceivable pressures that are dimly understood; yet they are frequently caricatured as witless and self-serving. There is a real opportunity to engage with them in the sobering responsibilities they shoulder, to pray for them as individuals and to provide practical support in their task as leaders. It is difficult to see how we can fulfil our responsibility to seek the peace and prosperity of our city without honouring and supporting its leaders. ?It is God?s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men? Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honour the king? (1Pet 2:15-17).

We will also need to maintain a particular sensitivity to the lonely and alienated: we ourselves have a sense of being away from our home as citizens of heaven. So we can never allow our communities to become a club that mainly serves the needs of our own members: churches that fail at this point deter outsiders.

If we are going to connect credibly with the leaders and the marginalised in a bustling city we will need to equip the Christian community for all the occupations and settings that they will encounter. This demonstrates the extent to which we have to be outward-facing, life-affirming and well-informed. God?s great purpose that cannot be thwarted is to be glorified in every tongue, tribe, people, and nation and cities are central to this purpose.