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Urban Mission Models

Over one hundred years ago Ellen White wrote, “The work in the cities is the essential work for this time. When the cities are worked as God would have them, the results will be the setting in operation of a mighty movement such as we have not yet witnessed” (2012:10). Today’s global population is over four times what it was when this was written and the urban population is thirteen times greater. It seems that urban mission is much more needed today than it was a century ago.

The world is rapidly changing. Educators must adapt their curricula and pedagogy to prepare students for jobs that do not yet exist, utilizing technologies not yet invented, to solve problems not yet encountered. The United States Department of Labor estimates that today’s learner will change jobs ten to fourteen times by the age of 38. As an example, the top ten in-demand jobs in 2010 did not exist in 2004 (Tirozzi 2008). The amount of new technical information is doubling every two years. For students starting a four-year technical degree, this means that half of what they learn in their first year of study will be outdated by their third year.

Since ancient times most people have lived a rural lifestyle, dependent on agriculture, and hunting for survival. In 1800 only 3 percent of the world’s population lived in cities. In 1900 about 14 percent lived in urban areas, with only 12 cities having over one million inhabitants. Recent decades have brought about exponential urban growth. Today, more than 500 cities have a population over one million. Since 2007 more than 50 percent of the world’s population lives in urban areas. According to the United Nations (2007), today’s urban population is expected to swell globally to 70 percent by 2050. Additionally, there are now more than 20 megacities in the world, each with more than 10 million inhabitants (Lineback and Gritzner 2014). These staggering changes must challenge us to consider how to minister in the fast growing areas.

Christ's Methods Alone

Building loving relationships is an essential part of any mission work. In the beginning the first man and woman started out in a perfect relationship with God (Gen 1:2). At the end of this world's history there is a restoration of that perfect relationship (Rev 21:22). Tragically, the third chapter of Genesis describes relationships that were broken as a result of sin. Jesus came to heal and restore all broken relationships. According to Reggie McNeal, "The mission of God is a redemptive mission. Everything that sin broke is being addressed and restored through God's mission. This includes not just the ruptured relationship between God and humanity, but also the relationship of humans with themselves, with one another, and with the rest of creation" (2011:623)

Ministry is joining with God in the work of healing all these areas of brokenness. Ellen White stated, "If we follow the example of Christ in doing goodness, our hearts will open up as well as His" (2002:150). We need to learn from Christ how to apply a healing touch to broken people. "Christ's method alone will give true success in reaching the people. . . . The Savior mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, 'Follow Me'" (White 2007:143).

This comprehensive approach to outreach is not only based upon a specific formula but also in accordance with several statements where Ellen White reinforces the fact that evangelism is not only the proclamation of a message. As she said, "Preaching is a small part of the work to be done for the salvation of souls" (1892:322). We need to live the gospel in a practical way. "The world will be convinced, not by what the pulpit teaches, but by what the church lives. The minister in the desk announces the theory of the gospel; the practical piety of the church demonstrates its power" (1902:16). "The cities are to be worked, not merely preached to" (White 2012:95).

The traditional approach of evangelistic campaigns has become too expensive and not very effective, especially when reaching out to people with no Christian or religious background. For Tim Keller, "the church growth movement has made many lasting contributions to our practice of ministry. But its overemphasis on technique and results can put too much pressure on ministers because it underemphasizes the importance of godly character and the sovereignty of God. . . . When fruitfulness is our criterion for evaluation, we are held accountable but not crushed by the expectation that a certain number of lives will be changed dramatically under our ministry" (2012:107).

The effectiveness of any outreach initiative has to be understood within a “new” paradigm. It is new because it has not been used as widely as it should have been. It is not really new because it has a stronger biblical base than the Western idea of proselytizing and evangelizing that is production oriented instead of personal oriented. Even in the corporate world the process of change has been identified as a long process. As Keith Ferrazzi stated, “At the simplest level, the comparison is this: Organizations can’t change their culture unless individual employees change their behavior—and changing behavior is hard. Many change programs focus on providing strategies, technologies, and training. But often that is not enough. When it comes to modifying deeply ingrained behavior, 12-step programs have a superior track record” (2014:24). As Bakke said, “There is a relationship always between the presence of the godly and the preservation of urban communities” (1997:39).

God’s Plan to Reach the Cities

Cities are full of energy and culture, and in them you find the most beautiful church buildings in the world. Sadly, many are now just architectural works of art. More than a hundred years ago the Adventist movement was challenged to reach the cities using innovative methods: “there is means now tied up that should be in use for the unworked cities. . . . These cities have been neglected for years” (White 1946:428). This challenge is even more important today. For example, Monte Sahlin says, “Four out of five Americans live in the metropolitan areas, while the majority of Adventist members in the U.S. and more than two thirds of Adventist churches are located elsewhere. The mission of the Adventist Church in North America is primarily an urban mission. This is particularly true in the ‘Bo-Wash Megalopolis,’ the urban corridor that runs from the northern suburbs of Boston in New Hampshire to the southern suburbs of Washington in Virginia. This is the largest urbanized area on the globe. One out of every six Americans live here” (2007:2).

The church is God’s “plan A” to reach the cities, and there is no “plan B.” The church is not a building. It’s God’s people, his sons and daughters. Jesus built his church, “This is the rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out” (Matt 16:18, *Message*). Perhaps in our attempt to protect the church from the world for fear it would come inside the church, we forgot to go out to reach the world. I believe Jesus was saying the world should be afraid of the church and not the other way around.

What makes a great church? When we describe a successful church, most of the time we are really talking about a church that meets our needs.

A church that has preaching that makes us feel good or challenges us just a little, but not too much. A church that has music that pleases us—it has drums or does not have drums (depending on which we prefer). A church that has a program or two that makes us feel as if we have a place to serve. There is nothing wrong with good preaching, good music, and well-run programs. Yet these things do not define a successful church. “Preaching is compelling to young secular adults not if preachers use video clips from their favorite movies and dress informally and sound sophisticated, but if the preachers understand their hearts and culture so well that listeners feel the force of the sermon’s reasoning, even if in the end they don’t agree with it. This is not a matter of style or program” (Keller 2012:156).

Most of all, the church is for God. But if you look at many of our gatherings, you might think we are more concerned how the congregation feels about things than how God might actually feel about them. God has a church—the church does not have a God! A healthy and successful church is one where Jesus Christ is found in word and deed. A God-honoring, gospel-loving church is one where the Word of God is the primary motivator for doing the work of God—a church that is seeking the shalom of the city. According to Patrick, “Shalom is much richer than the absence of conflict or a trendy way to say good-bye. Biblical shalom connotes universal human flourishing. By seeking the shalom of the city, God was asking those in Babylonian captivity to live and invest in the midst of the social and cultural world of their enemies, encouraging and supporting the goodness and enjoyment of life by creating shalom in every niche of society” (2011:23-24).

Why Not the City?

Last December I visited an Adventist Church near downtown Taipei. It was a beautiful Sabbath morning and I was greeted by the usher at the front door. I felt relieved as I was invited to a Sabbath School class in English since I would not be able to participate much in a regular Chinese group. The only difference I noticed was that this Sabbath School class was not studying the regular quarterly; they were reading the book of Jonah and they had an inductive Bible study. After almost an hour of exciting discussions about how Jonah was reluctant to fulfill his mission and later complaining about being so successful, the class was over. After talking with the class coordinator I realized that most of the attendees were people from the community, non-Christians, and even atheists. The teacher, an American girl, is teaching English in Taipei. On Wednesday evenings she teaches English at the church. As the interest of the community increases she offers a free of charge class on Saturday mornings and most of her

students take advantage of this bonus. The most interesting thing that happened was the text read that morning, which was in Jonah where the Lord said, "Should I not have concern for the great city?" (Jonah 4:11, NIV).

The people living in the cities need to hear that the Lord is concerned for them. As stated by Ellen White, "The cities must be worked. The millions living in these congested centers are to hear the third angel's message. This work should have been developed rapidly during the past few years" (1946:1). One in five Americans has no religion. According to a Pew survey, the fastest growing "religious" group in America is made up of people with no religion at all. Today, one in five Americans does not identify with any religion, the highest share since the Pew Research Center began this poll in 2007 (Merica 2012). Still, the United States is more religious than some other countries. Take a look at how religious beliefs in the United States compare to other first world Western European nations:

- Fifty-eight percent of Americans believe religion is important to them compared to less than 20 percent in France and Britain.
- More than half of Americans believe it is necessary to believe in God to be moral and have good values, while 20 percent or less think so in France, Spain, and Britain.
- Among those who are religiously unaffiliated, most believe in nothing at all.
- Since 2007, Protestants have lost 5 percent of affiliated Americans, Catholics have lost 1 percent, and those with no religious affiliation have increased 4.3 percent.

What about the Seventh-day Adventist Church? According to McEdward and Trim (2013), even though the world population to members' ratio was 396 to 1; the global urban population to members ratio was 547. There were 2,522 members per million, but only 1,826 urban church members per million. Historically the Adventist Church is not doing well in urban areas.

There are many reasons, such as, financial, historical, and theological. First, there is no doubt that any outreach initiative in the city can cost a lot more than in the suburbs or small towns. The financial restraints are increasing as time passes. Second, our pioneers came from the countryside and the Adventist Movement has been one of small towns and villages from its beginning. It was difficult for early Adventists to work in the cities and it is getting harder for us today since we do not prepare people to be missionaries in the city. Another reason might be a misunderstanding of the arguments presented by Ellen White regarding the work in the cities. The quotes advising country living were over emphasized. Monte Sahlin stated, "I found 107 periodical articles on city work. Of these, 75

give specific instruction about moving into the cities for the purpose of reaching the cities" (2007:16).

Present Opportunities

Even though the cities present a formidable challenge for the gospel, they also offer tremendous opportunities for ministry. Keller introduces a range of unique opportunities for urban ministry saying, "The growth in size and influence of cities today presents the greatest possible challenge for the church. Never before has it been so important to learn how to do effective ministry in cities, and yet, by and large, evangelical Christianity in the United States is still nonurban" (2012:4447).

The younger generation is attracted to diversity, innovation, better job opportunities, and education. As an example of this attraction David Brooks wrote (2009), "Cities remain attractive to the young. Forty-five percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 34 would like to live in New York City." New York City's population increase since April 2010 represented 84.5 percent of the total increase in New York State (NYC Gov 2013). And "a majority of New York's most desirable neighborhoods (for young people) are located in close proximity to the vibrant social scene of downtown Manhattan" (NYC Guide 2013).

Another important group to be considered in the urban area is represented by the cultural elite. Keller suggests that "the power of their influence on how human life is lived in a society [is] because they exert power in business, publishing, the media, the academy, and the arts" (2012:4468).

The third opportunity is among the "unreached." In the city are people from all over the world that would hardly ever have an opportunity to come in contact with the gospel. The fourth group to be reached is the poor. As we minister to them we can also partner with the most influential people in the city in reaching out to them. Community services programs often serve both the poor and create bridges with the elite who are interested in doing something to benefit them.

Models to Reach Urban Areas

"The church is God's appointed agency for the salvation of men. It was organized for service, and its mission is to carry the gospel to the world" (White 1911:9). I have identified five relevant Urban Ministry Models that can facilitate the fulfillment of God's mission in urban areas. These principles not only can be applied anywhere, but they need to be practiced to implement a more comprehensive approach to evangelism. The five models include small groups, missional communities, church planting, leadership development, and centers of influence.

Small Groups

The first model is a small group ministry that emphasizes discipleship. For a couple of years I have been meeting with a master group for leadership development. This discipleship group met once a week for seven weeks and then continued meeting once a month. The group also has an e-mail list for sharing ideas and information about upcoming events. This group offered a safe environment to make disciples.

The small group uses an inductive Bible study method that allows the Word of God to speak to every person, every group, every interest, and every need. We have seen the Holy Spirit do beautiful things when least expecting it. You do not have to be a gifted teacher to use this method, because the only thing you need to lead a great small group is the Bible. The informal and friendly environment provides opportunity for deeper understanding of the Bible, which can even be further enhanced in private conversation at a later time. The leader starts the meeting using ice breakers, takes the group through the reading and discussion of a Bible story, and then creates an effective close by asking questions on what the main lessons learned are and how to apply the message to their personal lives.

Rockland Emmanuel is a mission group meeting in Stony Point, NY. It is a small group-based congregation led by James, a bi-vocational pastor, which just completed its second year. It started as a small group of seven members. They multiplied into three small groups in the community. Later they began to worship together on Sabbath. Now the attendance is over fifty. They added eight new members by baptism in one year. This was over 100% growth by conversion in a year.

Missional Communities

The second model is missional communities. Ellen White said, "I saw jets of light shining from cities and villages, and from the high places and the low places of the earth. . . . God's word was obeyed, and as a result there were memorials for Him in every city and village. His truth was proclaimed throughout the world" (1909:28). A missional community model is concerned with the principles of how to be the church and how to assimilate new disciples. It is a new paradigm of church community.

This model seeks to create a third place where people feel comfortable to pray and read the Bible, even if they have no religious background. The Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz said (2006), "We are in the business of human connection and humanity, creating communities in a third place between work and home." Missional communities, according to Mike Breen and Alex Absalom are "a group of people, about the size of an extended

family, doing the mission of God together outside the regular confines of the church building” (2010:216).

A few years ago a group of twelve to fifteen young people got together to make a difference in Orlando, Florida. They selected some of the most difficult neighborhoods to witness in. One of the areas was so challenging that instead of bringing a pastor to give them training they brought a police officer. That community was very needy with a high level of criminal activity. They developed several different kinds of community programs, such as food distribution, helping people find jobs, back to school parties, Bible studies, and other activities to develop friendships in the community. The group grew and later they started meeting for worship on Sabbath afternoons, calling themselves the Lighthouse. Pastor Paul Korac started a missional community called Reach New York Community in Queens, NY. They have been meeting for the last three years in two home fellowship groups that meet once a week. They also come together for community outreach. A few months ago they started meeting every Sabbath afternoon as a Mission Group.

Church Planting

A third important model for urban mission is church planting. The Apostle Paul chose to start new congregations in strategic cities. On his second missionary journey, he established a Christian church in Thessalonica, with this church as a model for others (1 Thess 1:7-8). According to Peter Wagner, “Planting new churches is the most effective evangelistic methodology known under heaven” (1989:168). Ellen White also affirms this when she suggested that “churches are to be planted. No great centers are to be made. . . . There should not be a call to have settled pastors over our churches” (1903:5).

As part of the Mission to the Cities initiative about twenty new congregations were started in the Greater New York Conference (compared to an average of 2 or 3 in previous years). Since January 2013, Pastor Samuel Peguero started a new English-speaking service in the Mott Haven Church in the Bronx. In reality it is not a new service but a new church called Fusion that started within a Spanish church, led by young people. Emanuel Contreras, the youth pastor, gives leadership to the program equipping the young people for ministry. The hall they are using is already full and they are considering starting another service before the end of the year. The new plant was organized as a church before the end of the first year and they have already planted another new congregation. The mother church, Mott Haven, is experiencing unprecedented growth and the leaders are considering planting another church soon.

Leadership Development

Fourth, these new congregations that are being started necessitate a new kind of leadership. In order to continue to foster the growth and the expansion of the kingdom the Adventist Church will need a different approach towards leadership. As pastors start giving leadership to a multi-church district, lay leaders will need to take the lead. A lay pastor program was started two years ago in the conference and there are now seven bi-vocational pastors in the program. One of the lessons learned was that pastors need to develop their skills as mentors, equipping lay leaders to plant new churches.

Center of Influence

The fifth model is the Centers of Influence model. Ellen White described the work done by the church in San Francisco as a “beehive” (2012:190). Centers of influence need to be established in urban areas to develop a variety of activities such as lifestyle education, treatment rooms, bookstores/reading rooms, restaurants, literature ministries, lectures, small groups, health, and culinary seminars. She said, “Workers with clear minds are needed to devise methods for reaching the people. Something must be done to break down the prejudice existing in the world against the truth” (1946:129). In order to find true success we need to develop creative ways in following Jesus’ method to reach people.

New generations of Americans are returning to the central cities. Where the Baby Boom generation, now middle-aged, swelled the suburbs, Gen X, the new ‘30 something’s, and the Millennial generation, today’s young adults, are settling closer to downtown. Traffic is more tangled and public transportation in decay, but more and more urban neighborhoods are experiencing renewal and even ‘re-gentrification’ as more newly affluent, young professionals elect to stay in town instead of heading for bedroom communities. Retirees also are returning. (Sahlin 2007:2-3)

Tony Romeo, pastor of the Historic Manhattan Church in New York City, also leads out in a Reach-NYC Ministry. His church offers health ministries on a regular basis. Maria Alvarez, a registered nurse, works as a volunteer preparing samples of food. She invited the physician she works with to attend the seminars. She liked it so much that she has become a seminar speaker. In turn, this physician invited a colleague, who also lectured at the seminar. Guests also learned that the Historic Manhattan Seventh-day Adventist Church serves a vegetarian lunch every Saturday

afternoon after the church service, and they were all invited to come and enjoy the service and great food. Other activities include a *Café Church* on Friday evenings and they have also opened the doors of the church for community concerts. Recently, I attended one of them, where 80 percent of the 200 attending were guests from the immediate community. This church is becoming a center of influence for the Greenwich Village.

Church for the City

Instead of just assuming a judgmental, aggressive, or an attitude of isolation against the city and the world we live in, we should find ways to promote healing and bring hope to the large crowds in urban areas. Even though Jacques Ellul concluded that cities are evil since they symbolize the supreme work of human beings; he challenged the church that has been badly affected by its compromise with the world “to find its own way, given it by God, which it alone can follow. It is only on this condition that the church will cease to be a sociological movement, and be present in the world with the effectiveness given by the Holy Spirit” (1989:126). The Bible does present the idea that the human ideal will find fulfillment in a return to an idyllic Eden, but rather to a new city where God will live with his children. Human history started in a garden but finishes in a city.

Jeremiah challenged the people of Israel living in Babylonian captivity to look for the “shalom” of the city (Jer 29:4-9). To accomplish that same task today the church has to invest, influence, and make a difference in the social and cultural world where they live. Patrick describes four basic approaches for churches to relate to the city: the church in the city, the church against the city, the church of the city, and the church for the city (2011:24).

Churches in the city are churches that are merely located in the city, and the most they do is to distribute brochures inviting people to attend their evangelistic meetings. *Churches of the city* wholeheartedly embrace the culture of the city so much so that they lose the flavor in their salt and the brightness of their light. There are also *churches against the city*. Churches of this type have adopted a defensive posture toward the city. They condemn everything around them as irredeemable. There is still another kind of church, the *church for the city*. This is a church that proclaims the truth of Scripture with passion, clarity, and boldness. At the same time though, this is a church that commits itself to seeking the *shalom* or the flourishing of the city. It is a church that loves the city.

On a Sunday afternoon a couple of days after Super Storm Sandy, I was walking in one the most affected areas of New York, Far Rockaway, and met Everette. Being a recent graduate from the seminary, this young lady

felt called to a ministry in NYC. She was conducting small groups among college students in Brooklyn. When the hurricane hit she offered her services as a volunteer. She became acquainted with hundreds of people in the area; many of them now are her close friends. Everette is still leading out in a few small groups in the community.

As I left the church building that day, which has been transformed into a distribution center, I saw another church down the road. The first one was messy because of the hundreds of people coming in and out, unloading trucks, distributing canned food, clothes, blankets, and hot meals. The second one had a tall young man standing by the door, sharply dressed in a black suit. It made me ask if Jesus was passing by that day, which church would he be attracted to? The answer was in the face of those who were serving the community. I saw the face of Jesus on each of those waiting in line to receive assistance.

Cities are at the epicenter of God's earthshaking movements today, and it is important that any model of outreach take into account the unique nuances of ministry in an urban context. Many of the above principles are applicable and transferable, from an urban church in New York City to a village in West Africa.

What I desire more than anything is to fulfill God's will and to catch a biblical vision for ministry—ministry done by churches that preach and serve as Jesus intended. I hope and pray that by God's grace you as Adventist leaders will be inspired to plant and lead churches that recognize and seize the opportunities existing within your cities and cultural contexts. By the power of the Holy Spirit I want our churches to be places where Jesus is preeminent, God's presence is obvious, and where there is no doubt in anyone's mind that we love our city.

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