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# A Theological Framework for Adventist Urban Ministry

## Introduction

Cities have existed throughout antiquity, from the times of Cain until now (Greenway 1989:5); however, they have long been a largely neglected frontier of mission. While missiologists have focused on how to win the unreached people groups of the world the population of cities around the globe had silently exploded.

Early Adventism typically advocated the need to flee the cities for simple rural living because cities were regarded as Babylon (Jer 50:1-3; Rev 18:2-3). Consequently, in those regions of the world where the church's presence has the longest history with sometimes larger congregations, many church properties are located in the countryside or rural areas. A major reason why the Adventist Church is only so lately coming to terms with the exigency of urban ministries is the deficiency of a theological framework for engagement in missions to the cities. Stone (2015) agrees that the failure to develop a theology for the cities is a factor in the inadequacy of mission initiatives in urban areas. The objective of this paper is to present a theological framework for Adventist urban ministries that will provide an impetus for effective and sustained mission programs in urban settings. This framework will be developed from a biblical study of God and the city, an examination of Ellen White's writings on mission to the cities, and an exploration of contemporary challenges cities pose to the church's task of taking the gospel commission to all regions of the world. This framework follows Van Engen's (1994:249) tripartite theology of mission model comprising an interface between the biblical text, the faith community, and the urban context.

## God and the Cities in Antiquity

It has often been stated that the human race began in a garden; however, for Greenway (1989:3) humanity's ultimate destiny lies in the city. Among the well-known cities of antiquity were Babel and Nineveh. The earliest of these was the city built by Cain and named after his son (Sills 2015:23). Sidney Rooy (1979:178) posits that "with the notable exceptions of Nineveh and Jerusalem, the building of cities was frequently construed as distrust of God's protection and often represented the incorporation of idol worship into Israel's national life (Hos 8:14)."

Among the cities of old, Sodom was associated with evil, immorality, and corruption. It is mentioned "thirty-four times in the Old testament and seventeen times in the New" (Bakke 1987:64). Its notoriety lent its name to the practice of sodomy, which eventually led to its divine destruction with only Lot's family being spared (Gen 19). Besides its obvious problem with immorality and sexual plurality, Sodom's even bigger issue in the sight of God was its arrogance and indifference to the plight of the poor and needy in its midst (Ezek 16:48-50; Bakke 1997:42).

Nineveh is another city of antiquity, regarded by some to be among the greatest city that ever existed. For Greenway (1989b:9), the call to urban mission has its origin with God's commission to Jonah to go preach in Nineveh. Nineveh was one of the three capital cities of the Assyrian empire and was well-known for its brutality, violence, and wickedness (Bakke 1987:65). Jonah's experience in Nineveh is demonstrative not only of the loving character of God, which transcends ethnic and national boundaries, but also of the profundity of God's love for cities and their inhabitants, no matter how repugnant and evil they may appear (Jonah 4:9-11).

### Babylon

Another great and influential city of antiquity was Babylon, whose ancient foundations were established by Nimrod (Gen 10:9-10). Nimrod was the founder of both ancient cities of Nineveh and Babylon (Ellul 1978:13). Babylon whose name meant "the cornerstone of heaven and earth," was an idolatrous city considered to be "the navel of the universe" (Rooy 1979:178). The neo-Babylonian city flourished and became a major empire under the reign of king Nebuchadnezzar. During his reign, Jewish exiles were carried into captivity and the vessels from the temple of God were transported to Babylon. Jeremiah's missive to the Babylonian exiles again demonstrates God's concern for cities and their inhabitants. The captives were instructed by God to seek the *shalom* of Babylon and to pray for its

well-being. This radical call from God was to a people who would have rejoiced to see the punishment and destruction of their captors, for they had laid waste their own nation, culture, and life. God desired for the Jewish refugees to see themselves as his missionaries to the city he obviously was concerned about (Jer 29:4-7). Similarly, Christians today should seek the *shalom* of the urban contexts in which they live and work, and pray for their city's wellbeing.

### Jerusalem

In the Bible Jerusalem is depicted as the city of God; "a symbol of God's presence and power in the world" (Bakke 1997:63). In contradistinction to Babylon whose citizens live in opposition to God, Jerusalem is a city where a theocracy is established, God is honored, and its citizens are in a covenant relationship with him (Greenway 1989b:7).

### Ministry in OT Cities

Ray Bakke (1987) asserts that the priesthood in Old Testament times "was an urban institution," having up to 25 different types of identifiable ministries that it performed. He further demonstrates that the greatest OT characters, such as Moses, Joseph, Daniel, and Nehemiah functioned in urban settings (69-72). Apparently, the locus of political and social activities in Old Testament times were the cities. It was in these urban contexts that the kings governed, and where the largest concentrations of people lived. As a result, even the prophets of old went to these centers of administration, commerce, and culture with messages from the Lord urging them to repent.

Ancient cities were not merely centers of commerce or government; they also had religious foundations. "Among the Gentiles, cities were religious institutions, the dwelling places of the gods whose name they often bore . . . Ziggurats, or temple towers, were a characteristic testimony of ancient Near Eastern architecture to those triumphs of the gods and the orientation of its cities to their devotion" (Conn 1979:238). As a result, cities were also places where the conflict between good and evil erupted in power encounters.

### God and the Cities in New Testament Times

Roger Greenway (1989d:13) succinctly states, "Mission in the New Testament was primarily an urban movement." The center of Jesus' ministry was Capernaum, a major city of his time. This point is buttressed by the

fact that all the epistles of Paul were written to major urban centers of his day where churches had been established. Clearly, therefore, Jesus and Paul recognized the importance of mission in the cities. Bakke (1987:78) observes that although salvation began in a garden, God intends that it ends in the city (the New Jerusalem); just as Jesus began in Galilee but wound up in Jerusalem—the “center of religious, economic and political power.”

Paul’s mission, similarly, focused around urban centers such as Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, and eventually ended in the largest metropolis of his age, Rome (Bakke 1987:80). Greenway (1989d:32) observes that although Antioch was known for its corruption, immorality, wickedness, idolatry, and vice, interestingly, Luke never mentions these, rather he focuses on the spiritual activities it became known for; eventually overtaking Jerusalem to become the missionary headquarters of that age.

Christ viewed the cities as places of crises, confrontation, the cross, and where compassion was greatly needed (Olver 2010:7). The Gospels present Jesus weeping over the city of Jerusalem because of his desire to save a city that spurned his love (Matt 23:37; Luke 19:41). In Jesus’ commission to his disciples for the proclamation of the gospel around the world, it is noteworthy that the places he mentioned where they were to go included Jerusalem and Samaria (Acts 1:8). Also, significant is Jesus’ declaration in John 3:16, that “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son” to save it. The Greek word, *cosmos*, translated as “world” includes the cities, and their inhabitants.

It can therefore be surmised from the above passages that ontologically God loves the cities and their inhabitants, but abhors the evil and vices often associated with urban living. Why does God love the cities? Perhaps because they have the highest concentrations of people—people whom God desires to come to repentance (Jonah 4:11). It can also be argued that if God was opposed to the existence of cities, why would he create one as the home of the redeemed for all eternity (Rev 3:12, 21:2)? Clearly, therefore, God is deeply interested in cities and desires to establish his kingdom wherever possible in the cities of the world. Similarly, therefore, the church should seek the *shalom* of the cities of the world and work to establish God’s kingdom in them.

### Ellen White and the Cities

Notice Ellen White’s comments on the mission activities that took place in the city of Antioch where believers first became known as Christians. “While it is in the order of God that chosen workers of consecration and talent be stationed in important centers of population to lead out in public

efforts, it is also His purpose that the church members living in those cities shall use their God-given talents in working for souls" (2012:17). In other words, just as it happened back in the days of the Apostle Paul, God desires to have special work done by carefully selected people in the cities.

Over a century ago White stated, "The importance of making our way in the great cities is still kept before me. For many years the Lord has been urging upon us this duty, and yet we see but comparatively little accomplished in our great centers of population. If we do not take up this work in a determined manner Satan will multiply difficulties which will not be easy to surmount" (2012:26). If a century ago the need for urban ministries was urgent to Ellen White, how much more imperative is that need in these times?

One major reason Ellen White cites for urgent missions to the cities is because, "In the great cities are multitudes who receive less care and consideration than are given to dumb animals" (35).

We are living in the midst of the "epidemic of crime," in which thoughtful, God-fearing men everywhere stand aghast. The corruption that prevails, it is beyond the power of the human pen to describe. Every day brings fresh revelations of political strife, bribery, and fraud. Every day brings its heart-sickening record of violence and lawlessness, of indifference to human suffering, of brutal fiendish destruction of human life. Every day testifies to the increase of insanity, murder, and suicide. Who can doubt that satanic agencies are at work, among men with increasing activity to distract and corrupt the mind and defile and destroy the body. (41)

She goes on to explain, "The world over cities are becoming the hotbeds of vice. On every hand are the sights and sounds of evil" (42). Thus the degenerated moral state of affairs, and the appalling social conditions present a scenario that cannot be ignored by God or his people.

Another motivation for mission to the cities is a needed response to the divine challenge. "God asks, Why are not memorials for Me established in the cities? What answer can we return? The neglected work in our cities testifies to the lack of Christ-like energy among believers. Let all awake to the need of establishing Christian missions in the cities" (49).

As Abraham and the patriarchs of old travelled throughout the land, they set up altars in worship of the God of heaven, which served as memorials to the Creator. Such memorials are still needed in the cities of the world today and should represent places where the kingdom of God has been established. Holy spaces should also serve as lighthouses for those seeking after God in a world largely under the control of the enemy.

Concerning what needs to be done about missions in the cities, Ellen White states, "As a people we are not doing one fiftieth of what we might do as active missionaries. If we were only vitalized by the Holy Spirit there should be a hundred missionaries where there is now one. In every city there should be a corps of organized, well-disciplined workers, not merely one or two, but scores should be set to work" (81-82). In a similar vein, in 1909 she wrote, "Behold the cities, and their need of the gospel! The need of earnest laborers among the multitudes of the cities has been kept before me for more than twenty years" (97).

From the foregoing, it is obvious that cities the world over are a great source of interest and concern for the Lord, which is why Ellen White was given repeated visions of this nature. More effort and focus is therefore needed in the cities than has been displayed by the church. Further, if there was a sore need for intensified effort over a century ago, how much greater is that true now.

In addition to the biblical and Ellen White admonitions, the next section explores the urban context and seeks to understand the nature of the challenges encountered by living in the world's cities. How is God directing his church in mission activities for those cities? In other words, how can those who collaborate with God better exegete the city (Van Engen 1994:253).

## **Urban Contexts**

The United Nations reports, "In 2016, 1.7 billion people—23 per cent of the world's population—lived in a city with at least 1 million inhabitants. By 2030 a projected 27 per cent of people worldwide will be concentrated in cities with at least 1 million inhabitants" (2016:3). In the category of megacities—those with 10 million inhabitants, or more—there were 31 of these, and 24 are found in the "global south." China accounts for six and India for five (4).

The World Cities Report (UN Habitat 2016) outlines the challenges associated with rapidly growing urban communities. These include the following: urban growth, change in family patterns, increased residency in slums and informal settlements, challenges in providing urban services, climate change, exclusion and rising inequality, insecurity, and upsurge in international migration. Several of these components present significant challenges to missions in the cities, for that reason a few of them are discussed in the following sections.

## Urban Growth

Among the earliest precursors for urban growth was the age of industrialization (Joslin 1982:23). Since then masses across the world have thronged to the world's cities in search of jobs and a better life. The rate of urban growth ever since has been significant. For instance, Greenway reported, "In 1800 only 5 percent of the world's population lived in urban areas. By 1900 the figure had increased to 14 percent. In 1980 it was approximately 40 percent, and by 2000 over half of the world [was expected to] be urban" (1989c:45). This phenomenal growth has come with its own attendant tensions and evils. Resources and structures for coping with this urban upsurge in many countries have been stretched beyond limits.

## Change in Family Patterns

The traditional family with a working father and a stay-at-home mother is no longer the norm in the cities. Single parenting is no longer novel, with the single parent more often than not being a working class female. The phenomenon of latchkey children is also widespread, especially since poor single mothers have to work and have no one to leave their children with. It is also not strange to find mothers being the sole income earners in the families. One of the consequences of these changes in family patterns is the breakdown of discipline due to the absence of a father as an authority figure in the lives of children.

## Slums and Informal Settlements

Often when people relocate to the cities they arrive without the necessary resources to adequately fend for themselves. They wind up living in the cheapest forms of accommodation possible, especially if there are no relatives or friends to depend upon. These ghettos, slums, and informal settlements are hotbeds of various social vices such as rape, abuse, crime, drug, and substance vending and usage. Many who live in such places constitute the cheap labor force for construction, industry, and other domestic purposes. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates about one-third of urban populations, constituting one billion persons, are currently living in slums and shantytowns across the world (Chan 2010:iv). Slums in many cities are now the prevalent settlement of choice for the marginalized in society, although in the past this used to be the dwelling places for only a small proportion of the populace (WHO 2010:8). The UN reports that globally urban population is growing by about 60 million persons annually, many of whom end up in slums,

shanties, ghettos, or informal settlements (4). In Kenya, for instance, Amnesty International (2009:1) reports that about 2 million persons live in slums and informal settlements within Nairobi, the capital city. Some of these slums have existed since the turn of the century.

### Urban Services

Countries and governments around the world are struggling to manage the significant movement from rural to urban settings and in many cases the infrastructure and services are inadequate to cope with the flight to the cities. This is especially the case in many non-Western countries where the standards of living in slums and informal settlements are often unsanitary and unsafe. The urban services stretched to the limits in many cities around the world include transportation, shelter, energy, water, health, and sanitation. Homelessness is another feature worthy of closer consideration. An estimate of 150 million persons are homeless, composing two percent of the world's population. Another 1.6 billion people, which is more than 20 percent of the global population is without adequate housing (Chamie 2017). The lack of this most basic of human needs is a prevalent condition found in just about all the countries in the world.

### Migration

One of the most visible phenomena of this age featured regularly in the news and social discourse is migration. The International Migration Report of the United Nations indicates that the rate of international migration continues to increase, as it has for the last seventeen years, so that in 2017 there were 258 million international migrants (UN 2017:4). There are several different categories of migrants: environmental migration, forced migration or displacement, labor migration, child migration, and international students (Migration Data Portal 2017). Unfortunately, migration exposes people to situations of vulnerability such as exploitation from migrant smugglers, human trafficking, and death/disappearance in the deserts or high seas. Another major contribution to migration is the growing incidents of political and military conflicts that force victims to seek escape and asylum in more peaceful regions.

### Poverty

One of the biggest causes for migration to the cities is poverty, while at the same time one of the most visible effects of migration is a diminished status and deeper poverty. The debate surrounding the definition of



poverty still rages on. Viv Grigg, who has devoted a major portion of his life living with and ministering to the poor, lists a number of people groups found in poor slums: street vendors, street kids, drug addicts, alcoholics, prostitutes, deaf, blind, amputees, and prisoners (2005:47-50). The causes of poverty are multifaceted and very complex, as Bryant Myers wisely observes (1999: 86). He advocates for a holistic understanding of poverty that considers factors such as physical, social, mental, and spiritual causes (83-86). One additional disturbing feature about cities is that they are the abode of both the affluent and the poor; and the gulf between them is significant. Jesus' statement, "the poor you have with you always" (John 12:8) is poignant and true.

### ***Missio Dei* and Urban Mission**

The missiological concept, *missio Dei*, acknowledges that mission is primarily the initiative and prerogative of God, and that the church is called to participate in this endeavor with the Triune God (Bosch 1991:392). Before developing a theology for urban mission, it will be necessary to identify where God is already at work in the cities so that the church may follow his leading. In light of this, it is evident from the study of principal cities in the OT that God strategically called and positioned great figures such as Abraham, Moses, Joseph, and Daniel in the nexus of bustling metropolis so that a witness of the Creator God lived among all the inhabitants of these major urban contexts.

Another lesson is that for urban missions to be successful they must be incarnational. Christ and the above-mentioned characters from the OT lived and functioned in the urban settings they were called to serve in. They identified with the people and communicated in the cultural forms and modes that were completely recognizable by their audiences.

Migration is another agency that God has employed over the course of time for the purpose of mission. Migration has relocated God's witnesses to needy urban centers where there were few witnesses or has brought prospects to cities where they could be witnessed to or could encounter the power of God. These mission modes are referred to as centrifugal and centripetal mission forces, which serve to either push or pull people towards evangelization. A good recent example of this is seen in the waves of refugees from certain parts of the Middle East and Asia who have found themselves in new urban contexts where the gospel is now accessible to them.

## **Adventist Theology for Urban Mission**

The above sections examined the Scriptures to understand God's perspective on cities, looked briefly at the writings of Ellen White for early Adventist attitudes and practices, and exegeted the global urban context. With this as a background, it is therefore possible to develop an Adventist theological framework for ministering in urban contexts. The foregoing exercise has revealed God's passion for the cities; the immense mission needs present in the cities, where God is already working, and how the church can join in the process. An Adventist theological framework should therefore revolve around the following foci: redemption, restoration, relief, refuge, relevance, and resistance within urban contexts.

### Redemption

God's primary mission and disposition towards human beings—creatures of his greatest regard—is to redeem them. Christ declared, "The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10), and this he demonstrated throughout his mission on earth. Since the cities are where the largest concentration of people can be found in all regions of the world it is also there that God's endeavors to save humanity are focused. Accordingly, the Adventist Church should spend the most and do the most in the great cities around the world.

At Pentecost God unleashed supernatural power and produced extraordinary results because during that season Jews and proselytes from the diaspora were gathered to celebrate the Passover (Acts 2:5-11). Similarly, in urban settings where migrants and immigrants come from every nation, tribe, tongue, and people, God is demonstrating his power again. Therefore, the Adventist Church should expect, in answer to its prayers for assistance, power and grace—all that is necessary to proclaim the gospel for the salvation of the teeming hordes of lost persons in the cities. It is also noteworthy that back then when God performed his mighty signs and wonders through his servants, those powerful manifestations usually occurred in urban contexts. From the cities the events were noised abroad to other remote regions (Josh 2:8-11; Dan 3:28-29, 4:1-3). This seems to indicate that in the sight of heaven cities are and should be centers for intense redemptive activities, for it is in cities, more than anywhere else, that the densest concentration of lost humanity can be found.

### Restoration

At creation, God made humanity with the image and likeness of the

Creator; however, the entrance of sin quickly effaced that nature, so that generations later when God looked down from heaven he was grieved at what humans had become (Gen 6:5-7). The dominion Adam and Eve had was transferred to the devil. Ever since humans have been held captive to the power of Satan by their lusts and sinful desires (2 Cor 4:4). Since Eden, God has been working ceaselessly to restore in humanity his lost image. As the Adventist Church cooperates with God in his ministry of restoration and reconciliation the programs needed must be holistic in nature, embracing the physical, mental, spiritual, and psychological dimensions of the person. In urban centers the Adventist Church should establish platforms to attend to the total aspects of human needs—health and medical, addiction recovery programs, and support and counseling programs (Matt 4:24; Acts 28:8-9).

Restoration centers are desperately needed in all cities around the world due to the level of brokenness, suffering, poverty, privation, and pain prevalent there. As the church works to restore the dignity of humanity and the image of God in them it will truly be representing Christ who sought to heal and show compassion to everyone he met (Matt 9:36, 14:14).

### Relief

Another essential component of the church's ministry in urban centers should be relief activities. When Jesus fed the multitudes, he brought physical relief to hungry people (John 4, 6). Then, during the Apostolic age when there was a famine in Jerusalem, relief offerings were collected and shared with needy people there (Acts 11:27-30). Principle flowing out of these practices formed the bedrock for the establishment of the very first hospitals in existence, which were organized by Christian churches. The earliest relief and development agencies were also coordinated by the early churches.

The colossal need for relief assistance in the cities can be overwhelming, nevertheless, the Adventist Church should be at the vanguard in providing relief for the poor and needy and support for those who experience disaster or loss. When Jesus used the parable of the Good Samaritan he provided a blueprint for the church's relief mission in urban settings (Luke 10:25-37). If Christians are to be good neighbors they need to be present on the street corners, in the neighborhoods, alleys, and slum districts where the poor, suffering, and needy reside.

### Refuge

In ancient Israel God's design for the nation in the promised land

included cities of refuge (Num 35:5; Josh 20:1-2). These asylum cities were designated areas where fugitives, foreigners, and sojourners could find abode until such a time as their status was determined (Num 35:6-15). God also gave specific instructions to Israel about the care, concern, and welfare of foreigners, immigrants, and refugees. These concepts, which were to be enshrined in their national ethos, was premised upon the fact that they once also were refugees in a foreign land (Exod 22:21, 23:9; Lev 19:10, 33). God actually required his people to love the foreigner/stranger/immigrant as they loved themselves (Lev 19:34; Deut 10:19).

Seventh-day Adventist mission to the cities therefore should focus upon providing refuge, shelter, and support for immigrants and refugees. God has often brought such people to places where Christians live so that they are able to not only hear about God's love through his people but are able to experience this love in action. In the cities, there is never a dearth of people in need of refuge from life's storms. Perhaps more intentionally than has ever been done, Adventist missions to the cities should seek to provide the necessary social support and refuge needed for these strangers that God wants to incorporate into his kingdom.

### Relevance

For theology to be meaningful, it must be relevant. Similarly, a theology for Adventist mission to the cities must constantly seek relevance—to the needs of the people and for preparing them to be citizens of God's kingdom. Biblical history reveals that each time God revealed himself to humanity it was in forms identifiable to their contexts and consonant with their needs. Jesus did not merely preach about the kingdom of heaven; he demonstrated the glory of the kingdom in relevant ways wherever he went by healing the sick, comforting the weak, and showing compassion to the needy.

The Adventist Church's mission programs in the cities should be designed with this same double-pronged objective—to meet the needs of city dwellers and serve the purpose of the kingdom of God. In other words, wherever the needs are, there the church should be found fulfilling its purpose as the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt 5:13-16). Jesus also clearly explained that ultimately his people are those who cared for the needs of the poor, needy, oppressed, and downtrodden (Matt 25:31-46).

### Resistance

The Scriptures present cities as being the battleground for the conflict

of the ages between God and Satan. Timothy Keller (2018:4) sees in every city two kingdoms contending for control—the city of Baal and the city of God. Both kingdoms exist in opposition to each other. The Apostle Paul speaks about the god of this world blinding the hearts of men and women and holding them in captivity (2 Cor 4:4; Gal 1:4). As the Adventist Church seeks to reach the cities and establish the kingdom of God it will encounter opposition in various forms and from diverse quarters (McAuliffe and McAuliffe 2017:105-110) just as Christ (Mark 3:24-27) and Paul faced in their urban missions (Acts 19). For this reason, a theology of resistance is imperative; one that is countercultural and impervious to the challenges and attacks of the enemy, whatever guise those attacks may assume. Such a theology that recognizes the cities as the playground of the great controversy between God and Satan, light and darkness, should keep the church in a mode of resistance. Spiritual interventions and programs, which counteract the forces of evil, are therefore expedient if the strongholds of the cities are to be broken down and recaptured for the Lord.

## Conclusion

As the Adventist Church awakens to the awesome challenge of witnessing to the cities it needs a theology for urban missions that will motivate, empower, and direct its programs so that they may be effective and enduring. In light of this, such a theology should emphasize the following features: redemption, restoration, relief, refuge, relevance, and resistance. These focal themes, based of biblical principles and the writings of Ellen White, and an exegesis of contemporary urban contexts provide a foundation for Adventist urban engagement and a rallying point for recruiting personnel and resources for this urgent, imperative, and gargantuan task. God is waiting, is the church ready?

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