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# Serving the King: The Role of the Church in Urban Secular Mission Outreach

## Introduction

Imagine a city where the Seventh-day Adventist Church has had a presence for over a century, with a church of about 100 members, with 60-70 attending on a regular basis. Through the years, people move in and out, a few non-Adventists accept Adventist teachings and join from other denominations, while only a few non-believers are converted.

After some time this church is able to purchase a building in a great location, close to the downtown area. The goal of this purchase is to make the church more visible and accessible to the urban population. After some necessary remodeling, the church holds its opening ceremony, which is attended by several hundred people—many of them visitors from other local Seventh-day Adventist churches.

As time passes, this church conducts a number of public evangelistic campaigns and participates in satellite evangelism, but only a few new members join. The majority of the residents in this area of the city are unchurched, secular people. They are not interested in religious organizations or attending meetings in a church—concepts that have no relevance to their way of thinking.

Church members are discouraged and wonder what they are doing wrong. They question whether they made a mistake in buying the building and ask why the usual methods for saving souls is not working.

Now imagine that God calls you to go to such a city and win people for Jesus. How would you go about it? Where would you start? What strategies would you employ?

## Population Growth in Cities

Currently, over half the world's population lives in urban areas, and according to the United Nations, by the year 2050 this number will increase to two-thirds (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2014:1). According to the census conducted every 10 years by the United States Government Department of Commerce, in 2010 80.7% of Americans lived in urban areas (United States Summary 2010; Population and Housing Unit Counts 2010:12). Similarly, according to the *United Nations Demographic Yearbook* almost three fourths of Europeans live in urban areas (Eurostat 2016). As you can see, cities provide a large mission field.

However, in spite of the mission potential of cities, only a small percentage of Adventists live in urban settings. A recent study (Sahlin, Činčala, and Richardson 2018) of church members in the North American Division showed that only 4.2% of Adventists live in downtown areas, while another 14.6% live elsewhere in the city, meaning that only 18.8% of Adventists currently live in cities. This number has dropped considerably since the study was last conducted in 2008, when 27% of respondents reported living in a city (Sahlin and Richardson 2008).

While research does not provide a clear "why" as to the cause of this decrease of Adventists living in urban or city settings, it is clear that the Adventist presence in these settings is declining. Could it be that local churches have given up on reaching cities? Monte Sahlin writes, "By far the largest number of Adventist congregations in America are located in small towns and rural communities. . . . This . . . reflects the failure of Adventist evangelization to effectively penetrate the large cities. While about one American in five lives outside the major metropolitan areas, fully 50 percent of Adventist members live there" (2007:44).

The United Nations predicts the continued growth of city populations (2014:1). Adventists agree that the church has a God-given purpose and responsibilities to minister to those living in cities, so it is clear that something needs to change.

### Rethinking Mission to Cities: Theological Misconceptions

While there are church initiatives (such as Mission to the Cities) attempting to respond to the realities in urban areas, the question is to what degree these efforts are efficient and/or effective. The numbers and stories emerging from urban settings offers a hint of what is really happening.

In many cases, there is a false assumption regarding what the role of the church ought to be in urban settings. These assumptions may be

contributing to the present inadequate response. Sadly, the response is often designed to give the appearance of success. There are expensive advertising strategies, evangelistic meetings conducted by guest speakers, attractive teams put temporarily together for the occasion, and then counting of visitors, decisions for Christ, and celebrations for each baptism. Then, church life goes on as usual.

“In our church-centered understanding, we focus on what the church does when it gathers” (McNeal 2015:90). The church seeks to develop, celebrate, and/or improve, when necessary, its worship services, small groups, ministries, and other church-related endeavors.

When it “goes the extra mile” for reaching those in cities, it may develop a contemporary worship style and employ a charismatic worship leader or pastor. Occasionally a church is planted, which generally means that (sooner or later) a building is fixed up where members can invite people to attend worship, and if they come, members celebrate. The church conducts Bible studies with the new interests until a few adopt Adventist views and interpretations; then baptisms take place. The church may feel as if they have encouraged more members to join their “club”—members who believe and behave as they do—and thus church life moves on.

The question is, however, Is the church fulfilling the mission Jesus gave it? Is it truly following and serving him? Where is Jesus in this equation?

As Christian believers, Adventists follow the baptismal “formula” in Matthew 28:19, “baptizing [disciples] in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (NIV). However, somehow the rest of Jesus’ last words (called the Great Commission), specifically his instructions to make disciples of all nations, are often omitted. This happens in several ways: (1) members expect people to *come in*, instead of God’s people *going out*; (2) most churches lack a good disciple-making process and in too many cases, it is nonexistent; and (3) Adventist churches teach a lot, but do not necessarily focus on what Jesus taught or commanded.

As a result, in urban areas especially, winning lost souls and discipling them has become of secondary importance, as if they are optional. One excuse frequently made is that urban people do not respond in great numbers to evangelism. Less often, it is admitted that the established methods of evangelism do not work in secular, urban contexts. Yet, according to Jesus, the primary purpose of the church is to do mission. “Since the Kingdom of God had entered the human situation through Jesus and brought [us] into direct confrontation with Him, . . . the church is nothing less than the missionary people of the Kingdom of God” (Bright 1953:234).

What priority does the King have? Parable after parable teaches the central focus of God’s kingdom. God’s kingdom is like yeast that makes the dough rise, it is a small mustard seed that can grow exponentially, it is a seed that falls into good soil and grows into a productive crop (Matt 13),

and so on. The term God's kingdom is interpreted with various spoken or unspoken assumptions.

Seventh-day Adventists anticipate that Jesus will soon come again and emphasize the importance of preparing for his Second Coming. Because of this deep-rooted belief, it makes perfect sense for Adventists to assume that when Jesus taught about the kingdom, he referred to a heavenly kingdom yet to come; however, this is not exactly how Jesus presented it. Besides preparing disciples for his Second Coming, he also clearly stated, "The kingdom is here." Some believe that he was talking about the church, which he came to establish.

Is this really what Jesus meant? If people read the New Testament text carefully, they may conclude with Friesen, that "Jesus did not walk the roads of Palestine announcing the coming of the church" (2009:39). Careful analysis points out that Jesus was actually referring to himself when he discussed the kingdom; "[Jesus] is, in Himself, the kingdom. As the stories were told, 'entering the kingdom' became the favorite metaphor for experiencing Christ. Jesus' own person and work are the establishing of a new humanity" (Sweet and Viola 2010:106).

Jesus described the kingdom of God as a reality where he, himself, is present. The kingdom is the reign of Jesus Christ, our Lord and King, in our lives. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news!" (Mark 1:15). "Sandwiched in the middle of those two short sentences is the thrust of Jesus' message: the kingdom of God is here and now" (Mims 2003:40).

When referring to his "kingdom," Jesus was not referring to a specific physical spot. Similarly, his kingdom is not just for a particular group of people who qualify by geography, age, gender, ethnicity, or religion. Both Jesus' words and ministry demonstrate that anyone who repents is welcome to be a part of his kingdom. As God's people hope to unlock the doors of the kingdom to secular urban people, they need to listen to what Jesus said about the kingdom (and he said a lot). His teaching is too important to be misunderstood.

If the kingdom itself is Jesus, and if mission is so important to him, how does he want us to reach the cities? Before discussing some practical aspects of missionary work in cities, it is important to clarify some basic theological principles about the Kingdom.

### **Putting Urban Mission into Perspective: Kingdom Theology Unfolded**

What is the relationship between the church and the kingdom to which Jesus referred? As stated before, the church exists for the sake of missions.

“The church is missionary people—if she is not that, she is not the church” (Bright 1953:217; see also Glasser, Van Engen, Gilliland, and Redford 2003:227). In that sense the church functions as “a kingdom agent” placed in human society “to be salt and light” to the urban people who are often without “clue or hope.”

The kingdom has always been and never changes, but the church is dynamic and is always changing. The kingdom is universal, and the church is first and foremost local, geographical. Churches are part of their cultures, colored by languages, races, and social standings. The kingdom transcends all these characteristics. The kingdom of God contains the church, and the churches exist on behalf of the kingdom of God. (Mims 2003:72)

In the light of Jesus’ teaching, it is important to note the following. “The kingdom of God is the conception placed above that of the church; the church is not the kingdom of God. She exists for the sake of Kingdom; she represents the Kingdom of God on earth in the present age till through the coming of Christ . . . [the church] receives all her substance, her power and hope” (Skydsgaard 1951:386).

When thinking about the role of the church in urban society, we must not forget that the church “does not establish the Kingdom. It is rather the custodian of the Good News of the Kingdom. It bears witness to the fact that the Kingdom has already been set up by its King” (Bright 1953:234). The church is at her best when serving the King, not the other way around. “The church is the instrument of the Kingdom” (Glasser et al. 2003:125).

God is in charge of mission. He “will decide who will enter the eschatological Kingdom and who will be excluded” (Glasser et al. 2003:125). If it is his responsibility, what is our responsibility then? If “the kingdom is the ultimate reality and sovereign movement of God in the universe” then “the kingdom of God must be the central life focus that every person should seek and align with in order to know the full and abundant life God created people to experience in Christ” (ix). The focus of mission must be on his rule, his movement.

The kingdom of God is based on a different set of principles than the kingdoms of the world. “God’s kingdom has no geographical borders, no capital city, no parliament building, no royal trappings that you can see” (Yancey 1995:248). In his discussion about the principles for urban ministry, Thompson underscores the issue of values as follows:

Values are often unwritten assumptions that guide our action. Values demonstrate our conviction and priorities and are confirmed by our actions, not just our words. Values are not a doctrinal statement but,

rather, convictions that determine how our church operates. Values provide the foundation for formulating goals and setting the direction of the church's ministry. Core values are statements that affirm what is distinctive about a church. (Thompson 2011:24)

God's kingdom is built on love—a love so intense that God sent his own Son to become a servant and die in our place. Everything else stems from God's love and desire to save the lost. That may, however, not always be reflected in the church. Mims rightly argues when talking about church that lost people “will never feel welcome in a place where bickering, selfishness, coolness, and tension hang heavy in the air” (2003:82, 83). Yet, God's kingdom is all about mission *because* it is all about love.

This is where the tension between the kingdom and the church often occurs. “Christianity is now almost impossible to explain, not because the concepts aren't intelligible, but because the living, moving, speaking examples of our faith don't line up with the message” (Halter and Smay 2008:41). “The institutional church expends much energy positioning itself against the sinful world outside. . . . All too often, sinners feel unloved by a church that, in turn, keeps altering its definition of sin—exactly the opposite of Jesus' pattern” (Yancey 1995:259). While the church focuses on delivering the “message,” many times it does not translate in their posture (Halter and Smay 2008:42). The church shares the good news about salvation, but mixes it with the subtle rejection of the lost. As a result, many feel as though they are not “good enough” on the outside and/or do not comply with the external requirements upheld by the church.

“But the kingdom manifesto calls us beyond and beneath this kind of morality” (McLaren 2005:123). First, God's people are called to deal with their arrogance and prejudice and are called to move from the “external conformity to internal change of . . . mind and heart” (121; see also Halter and Smay 2008:46). Why, because the kingdom is presented as a place where: “captives find freedom, where those who can't see find new vision, where those who are stuck find movement again, where those without power are empowered, where the weak find strength, where the strong humble themselves in service, where those who feel lost are found, where, when the lost are found, celebration erupts” (Friesen 2009:39).

In such a setting or culture disciple-making is facilitated. The institutional church, however, often places its main focus elsewhere—on making converts (i.e., church members). “It is assumed to be enough for church leaders to make converts or induct members and leave discipleship to take care of itself or be cared for by ‘specialists’” (Willard 1998:303). Yet unchurched, urban people often cannot see merit in such a *modus operandi*; the process of becoming a member of a church does not add value to their

lives. However, they do see value in the idea of becoming better people and of making an impact in their community. If this is what Jesus offers, urbanites would most likely be among the first to accept it.

Yet, for whatever reason, the “making of disciples is pushed to the very margins of Christian existence. Many Christian groups simply have no idea what discipleship is and have relegated it to para-church organizations” (Willard 1998:300, 301). Willard goes as far as to say that “to explicitly intend to make apprentices to Jesus could be quite upsetting to congregational life” (303). “Non discipleship is the elephant in the church” (301). While discipleship was a central element in the early church, part of the good news often presented today is that “one does not have to be a life student of Jesus in order to be a Christian and receive forgiveness of sins” (301).

It is clear that “moving from a church-centered approach to a Kingdom-centered narrative will demand a complete change of principles, priorities, and practices—in other words, a culture shift” (McNeal 2015:134). How can the church adjust to such a role? This concept is explored in the next section.

### The Role of the Church: Following Jesus’ Example

Although Jesus spoke often of the kingdom, the word “church” is only mentioned by him three times. When Jesus was choosing his disciples, on whom his church was supposed to be built (Matt 16:18), he selected unusual people: a tax collector, an insurgent, a revolutionary, and several fishermen. These men were not royalty—the type of people you generally think of as inhabitants of a kingdom! It is also notable that not one among them had any elite religious training or background (i.e., no theologians among them). Of all the twelve disciples, Judas (who ultimately betrayed Jesus) was closest to the religious community and Pharisee sect.

When Peter said Jesus was the Messiah, the one who was sent to save them, Jesus answered him, “Yes, you are right. You didn’t come up with this idea on your own, though. This idea was inspired by the Father.” In this account, Jesus goes on to play with words, saying: “You know, you are Peter (the Greek *Petros*, which is a small stone or a small rock), and I will build my CHURCH on that rock (Greek *Petra*, a huge rock). Peter, you are a small rock, but I will set up my CHURCH on this huge rock” (Matt 16:18, my paraphrase).

In this context, the word church (*ecclesia*) appears for the first time in the New Testament (In all, Jesus mentioned the word church just three times during two occasions). The word *church* at that time was a commonly used word that did not have any religious connotation as it does



today (for more on this topic see The Correct Meaning of “Church” and “Ecclesia”). When women met together to read poetry, the church met. When people met to talk about the family, it was church. When men met and talked about finances, their meeting was called the church. The church simply meant meeting together, a gathering of people.

Peter acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah, and Jesus said that based on that truth statement, he would build his church. His church did not imply any indication of formal organization, buildings, offices, sacraments. Church was simply a meeting of believers—a community, an assembly—that acknowledged that Jesus came from God and that he is the Son of God.

Jesus continued to speak with Peter and the other disciples. He told them that he was giving them the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. When they helped other people discover the rock (that is, the truth that Jesus is sent from God and that Jesus is the messenger of heaven who can save from sin), those truths open the door to the kingdom of God. This allows people to live in communion with God, under God’s influence and protection.

This is why a discussion about a “kingdom-focused church” among mission-minded leaders is important. Such a church is not operated as a mechanical model or an organization focused on programming (Mims 2003:16). A kingdom-focused church is invested in people and the community in a different way. Such a church understands its mission (unlocking doors to God’s kingdom) as its primary reason to exist.

### A Cry for a Kingdom-Centered Church

Various contemporary authors have depicted a church that embraces the values of the kingdom Jesus promoted. Snyder’s vision in the 1980s was that local churches would grow into communities following kingdom principles. He pictured church as a “*countercultural* community, the embryonic community of the kingdom, distinct from the surrounding society at every point where that society is in bondage to the ‘basic principles of this world’ (Col. 2:8, 20)” (1985:115). Mims affirmed this vision approximately 20 years later, saying that a “church is a kingdom community of believers gathered locally in dynamic fellowship under Christ’s lordship.” “Nothing is more important to the kingdom on earth than the church” (2003:ix, x).

There is a cry for a church reflecting a community of God the Father, Jesus his Son, and the Holy Spirit; these three entities live in loving relationship and fellowship with each other. “In rather amazing, often hidden ways, the church embryonically embodies the kingdom *now*, on earth”



(Snyder 1985:88). Such a church connects rather than divides, restores harmony, settles conflict, and chooses “relationship over separation” (Friesen 2009:134). Such a church is characterized by welcoming people as they are “with all their problems and imperfections,” as Jesus demonstrated in his ministry by fellowshiping “with notorious sinners” and wanting “to help them experience transformation” (McLaren 2005:162, 163).

A kingdom-centered church means that everyone is to be actively involved in ministry. “One cannot have the church which is paralyzed in gifts and yet potent for the kingdom.” All are gifted—“women and men, young and old, rich and poor, new converts and seasoned saints” (Snyder 1985:116, 117). There are no exclusions or restrictions on whom God bestows gifts.

Such a mission-minded church crosses boundaries, whether cultural, ethnic, social, economic, political, or religious. As “the body of Christ,” the church is the most diverse, harmonious unit on earth. It is God’s intention to bring oneness in the church from the diversity of people in it (1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:27; Eph 2:11-14). McLaren suggests that the kingdom approach remains balanced by not being exclusive or rejecting people on the one hand or on the other hand by foolishly being so accepting in its inclusion that it self-sabotages itself. He talks about “*purposeful inclusion*. . . . The kingdom of God seeks to include all who want to participate in and contribute to its purpose, but it cannot include those who oppose its purpose” (2005:167).

In the context of urban mission another kingdom principle is incarnational ministry (Jacobsen 2003:81; Thompson 2011:25). It is vital that a missionary church be an incarnational church. By being sent the way Jesus was sent (John 1:14), the church reaches into every culture, context, and circumstance. Just as Jesus was aware of and sensitive to the culture in which he lived, so the church (sent by him) lives within its culture. What exactly this looks like continues to be researched, tested, and debated.

Thompson discusses the meaning of an incarnational model in urban context as follows:

To be incarnate means that we will become a part of the people, studying the culture and language of the inhabitants we are trying to reach. This culture may not be different ethnically, but there is also the urban cultural as well as social and economic elements that make each person unique. To truly understand the people one must rub shoulders day in and day out, to share in their culture, living where they live. (2011:26)

Thompson indicates (knowingly or unknowingly) that to win urban people today requires a similar process to that of sending missionaries to

culturally and geographically remote places where there is no Christian presence. Research of the context is needed, a new language must be learned, and a new lifestyle and way of living with the people must be adopted. “Being incarnate means that we will plant our roots and plan to stay for the long haul, . . . by doing this we will develop love for the people, and the people will begin to love us as we grow ‘in favor’ with the people we are serving” (27).

Today the church faces a dilemma: on one hand, many are willing to learn from Jesus and his teachings and desire to see the church grow among those learning the good news. Leaders talk about a kingdom-focused church and cast a vision for their churches to grow. God’s people cherish the hope that if they create a “warm, loving fellowship, our church will grow (Mims 2003:82, 83). However, is it possible that urban Christians have become blind due to their addiction to and focus on the church? Working with urban secular people may require letting go of the church as Christians know it today.

Churches are not part of most urban cultures or part of secular people’s identity. To follow Jesus’ example of an incarnational ministry means to become one with those for whom the church often makes no sense. Perhaps only after fully understanding and adapting to their way of thinking will it be possible to credibly communicate (both verbally and non-verbally) the gospel. Meeting urban people where they are allows Christians to start where the unchurched, non-believing people are. It is important to understand all the prejudices they may have against Christian churches. This deepening understanding may open the door to non-traditional forms of evangelism and churching by allowing God’s urban people to speak a “language” that the non-churched people understand and in a manner to which they can relate.

Does it mean a compromising of Christian (Adventist) values or, more importantly, one’s own faith? No, absolutely not. It only changes the way in which those values and standards are presented. An important question is whether or not urban Christians are open to search for ways of communication that allow, empower, motivate, and inspire new believers to grow? That may require the church to “increasingly manifests itself outside the walls of the traditional, institutional organization” to expose “every crack or crevice of our culture . . . to the gospel of the Kingdom” (McNeal 2015:103), because “a Kingdom oriented ecclesiology focuses on the work of the church *in the world*” (90).

God’s people must not succumb “to the temptation to mark the advance of the Kingdom merely in terms of institutional growth” since nowhere does the New Testament encourage identifying “ecclesiastical structures with the Kingdom” (Glasser et al. 2003:125). In the relational

modus operandi of mission places and practices, it is important to seek to “serve the relationships,” not the other way around (McNeal 2015:94).

Being a part of God’s kingdom provides freedom to go (out of the church) and “make disciples of all” (Matt 28:19). To be faithful to Jesus requires providing cultural bridges to secular urban people (Mehta 2013; Lipka 2016) so that when they become part of the kingdom they can live lives as God created “us to live—life at the maximum” (Mims 2003:40). That means to be released from the boundedness of the Western paradigm—“do this and you’re within the bounds, do that and you’re out” (Friesen 2009:165). Whatever structure is provided must allow a place where they “may grow in their faith and discipleship, serving as part of the world fellowship of believers” (Global Mission Issues Committee 1998).

Church—the way we know it—“must not be the goal of the gospel anymore,” particularly in urban secular contexts. “Church should be what ends up happening as a natural response to people wanting to follow us, be with us, and be like us as we are following the way of Christ” (Halter and Smay 2008:30). In order to be non-church for the urban Nones, the issues “are fundamentally different than from those that concern leaders and managers of institutional churches” (McNeal 2015:86). Mission-minded disciples of Jesus, according to McNeal,

are not obsessed with *how* or *where* they worship or *who* is authorized to do *what* at church gatherings. Their spiritual journey is not defined by the form of the church they attend. They are found in every tribe. Some attend cathedrals, while others participate in program-heavy evangelical congregations and still others gather in homes. Whether they are stay-at-home moms or executives of multinational corporations, their focus is on creating greater missional intentionality in every part of their lives—where they live, work, go to school, and play. (2015:86, 87)

“At times experimental organizational structures can be approved for testing, especially as a part of new initiatives in the mission of reaching resistant or previously unreached peoples” (Global Mission Issues Committee 1998). “The mission to non-Christians demands that we understand and relate . . . in new ways” (Global Mission Issues Committee 1999).

How then can the existing local churches support mission in the cities? In 1996, Mike Regele and Mark Schulz wrote a book with a provocative title called, “Death of the Church.” On the cover, they made the following statement: “The church has a choice: to die as a result of its resistance to change or to die in order to live.” A quarter of a century later, it is clear that this change is easier to talk about than do. However, for the majority

of urban people, the church *is* dead, as they see no value in being part of such an organization. If going to a typical church does not make sense to them and is of no value, a mission-minded church must be willing to serve the King by sending the “*ecclesia*” (i.e., apostles or missionaries) outside the church walls to the urban tribes and by humbly supporting and blessing them.

### **Where the Rubber Meets the Road: Practical Application**

Imagine that you are called to go to a city to reach the non-churched people. While there are cases where the local church (for whatever reason) refuses to be involved in sending missionaries to urban areas, your local church leadership is behind you. They are ready to welcome new people in the church; they are supportive of planting a new church, if needed, and they stand behind and support the mission team. As you begin your work in the city, what is your ministry going to look like? What are some practical methods you might employ?

As with any venture, before any formal steps are taken, a mission into an urban community should be surrounded in prayer. The mother church should pray, the missionary team should pray and search for what God is doing in the city, and each and every member within the mother church should lift up the urban ministry in prayer. In the following sections try to walk with the team in your imagination to better understand the major milestones on their missionary pathway.

#### Building Bridges

It does not take rocket science to find needs in the city. Cities are filled with all kinds of people with diverse needs and struggles. “Broken and dysfunctional families, poor health, destructive lifestyles, institutional and generational poverty, racism, crime—you name it” and you can find it in cities (McNeal 2015:127). The key, however, is for the ministry team to figure out, based on their calling and gifts, the needs to which they feel called to intentionally respond (Thompson 2011:27).

Whether one is trained as a good craftsman, a social worker, a nurse, or a Bible teacher, each of these professions is potentially able to build powerful bridges with people. Mission to the city requires holistic involvement, seasoned with intercession. In my own experience, the best modus operandi is to start (or get involved with an existing) non-profit organization, allowing for organic integration into the community.

In such situations, the model of “felt-needs seminars” followed by evangelistic lectures is not an effective or preferred strategy. First, the team needs to build essential credibility in the community. If you examine

Jesus' model, you will see that to relate appropriately to societal needs one must not just use an "in and out" approach. The focus of such a ministry should not be on public campaigns so much as on meeting and mingling with people, building relationships, and seeking their counsel about how best to respond to particular needs in the community. This interaction has the long-term goal of winning their friendship, confidence, and trust. To make a difference, urban ministry must be personal (Thompson 2011:31).

Another aspect of effective urban ministry is immersing oneself in every area in which the ministry is occurring. Thompson goes as far as to say that if you truly want to make an impact, you cannot commute (2011:27). While making a move such as this may be a daunting idea to many who currently live comfortably in rural or suburban areas, to understand the ins and outs of an urban community, as well as to become truly accepted by a community, one must become part of that community.

Once such a move has been made, it becomes easier to meet with people in their everyday lives, specifically in public spaces. Public spaces are key for urban ministry, as they provide "neutral territory that is necessary for the formation of informal relationships and for the building up of existing relationships" (Jacobsen 2003:79). Additionally, Jacobsen writes, "Public spaces provide a context for incarnational ministry" (81).

This is exactly how Jesus mingled with people during his time on earth, and how he can continue to do so through his ambassadors in various cultures, contexts, and circumstances. Jesus was not only aware of and sensitive to the culture in which he lived, but he also embraced his Jewishness and lived among the people as one of them. As such, those who are following in his steps should live in the city to meet people where they are, minister to them, show them love, and win their confidence in order to be able to invite them to follow Jesus (White 1909:143).

### Finding Church in Unexpected Places

Seventh-day Adventists are mission-minded people. When it comes to intercessory prayer on behalf of people who do not know Jesus Christ, Adventists are very active. Thirty percent more Adventists than the average number of other Christians reported they try to deepen relationships with people who do not yet know Jesus Christ (Činčala 2018b:239). At the same time, however, mingling with or befriending those who do not agree with Adventist beliefs or those who other Adventists might not "approve" of is not common or generally encouraged. This "us" and "them" mentality creates a barrier of mistrust, particularly in urban settings. Therefore, the key is to love and accept people even when you do not agree with them. The type of friendship described is "not just a matter of talking together about religion, but more of living together, sharing the gifts of life

together—attending one another’s weddings and funerals and birthday parties, even sharing in one another’s holidays” (McLaren 2012:229, 230). With-ness precedes and completes witness (239).

Our method of relational evangelism has been to initially build friendships with people in order to invite them to church later. While this may be done with good intentions, this may actually damage the relationships that have been so carefully formed. The Bible tells us that where two or three are gathered in his name (Matt 18:20), he is present (i.e., church happens). This means that church can happen when meeting on a street corner to share the love of Jesus; when encouraging and ministering to someone in need, church can happen; when cooking a meal and sharing it with a neighbor, church can happen. Church is not limited to four walls within a specific church building. Wherever you meet, be it in homes or various public spaces where you meet regularly with people, as long as you are gathered in Christ’s name, that is church.

Secular urban non-churched people are often far away from Christianity both in terms of beliefs and in terms of a biblically-shaped culture. Because of this, it generally takes more than simply inviting them to evangelistic meetings for them to experience Jesus. My personal experiences show that when working with such people it is not primarily about providing biblical, theological, or doctrinal information they may lack, as much as ministering to facilitate inner spiritual healing. This type of ministry takes time, personal investment, and also “supernatural” intervention (Thompson 2011:42).

Engaging others exactly where they are in life allows them to become more vulnerable, to take down their protective walls, and to quit pretending that everything is okay. By interacting with and loving them as they are, God’s people may help them experience the transformation that only Jesus can bring. Such intentional friendships that create an internalized sanctuary where God works miracles is life-changing. “Time after time, when I dare to risk friendship across barriers, I experience the Spirit just as Peter did with Cornelius. I’ve come to accept it as axiomatic: *a Christian moves towards the other in friendship*” (McLaren 2012:229).

How can this work? Imagine meeting with someone in a bar. While many of those living in an urban setting would have qualms about entering a church building, many of them would not think twice before entering a bar. While meeting in such secular environments, bar people may develop their first relationship with Jesus and start a mentoring process by Adventist Christians. In a public setting that is both familiar and comfortable, they can pray and hear Bible stories, getting a taste of what it means to follow Jesus and worship God. Should any non-churched person ever want to experience “official” or more traditional church, the mission team can gladly show them the way.



This relational and personal missionary approach is risky. Not everyone is called to cross boundaries into other people's lives and develop close-knit friendships far from the safety of church walls. In this type of authentic ministry, Christian witnesses become vulnerable and exposed. To have other believers hold you accountable and with whom you can meet and share your experiences, is essential. Jesus was accountable to his Father, with whom he spent time every single day of his ministry. When he sent out disciples for mission, he met with them afterwards to debrief them and hold them accountable.

### Discipling Non-Churched Urban Secular People

In my work with urban secular people, it was fascinating how they were often eager to grow personally as well as how they were relationally open. After mutual trust was established, mentoring became a natural way in which I could support them. However, this kind of relationship cannot be simply event-oriented or a short-term task. This type of natural discipling takes place outside of a classroom and goes beyond a 1-2 hour event (such as one church service a week). It also is not limited to short bursts of activities or programs.

I want to emphasize the fact that the Adventist ideal that seeks to create discipling churches where newcomers "feel at home" (Mims 2003:82, 83) is heading in the right direction; however, it is important to not underestimate/deny/overlook the urban reality and secular culture. Research and experience indicate that many urban people may never feel at home in our "church" the way we feel comfortable and appreciative towards "having" church.

As mentioned above, non-churched people are often numb towards typical church membership recruitment or enrollment processes (i.e., the business of membership/conversion versus true discipleship). Yet they are typically responsive to an inclusive approach that encourages them to get involved and helps them feel as if they belong long before they change their beliefs and behaviors. By getting them involved in community projects, leisure activities, and meeting up in public spaces, they begin to feel as if they belong to a group.

As time goes on, these group relationships can grow into meaningful friendships. Church missionaries and members of the community alike can support and mentor each other, growing people as well as growing in Christ. McNeal makes a good point by saying that we ignore the wealth of people we minister to when "we take the approach of doing things *for* people rather than *with* them. Just because people lack money does not mean they don't have other resources—time, labor, talent, connections,



and insights. People need to participate in their own recovery. Not only does this promote responsibility and accountability, but it also preserves dignity” (McNeal 2015:125, 126).

It is important to note that very rarely are non-churched folks interested in or drawn to a typical church experience. The feeling of a student-teacher relationship (or of a pastor-congregant relationship) is off-putting to them. The classroom-like setting is simply not effective for this population. However, they are likely to become part of meaningful projects (or ministries) and along the way they will grow through mentoring and coaching.

### Creative Ways of Communicating the Gospel

A major need for urbanites is not for information alone, but for healing and connection. In my own past ministry experiences, the team and I were able to see how people became more receptive as their hearts were healed and touched by God’s love. Following Christ’s example, the balance between information (brain), compassion (heart), and action (hands) proved to be an effective method of communicating the gospel. The gospel invites us to have an intimate relationship with God. That does not happen quickly. It takes time, just as forming friendships or deepening a dating relationship develops over time.

Creative ways of communicating the gospel, using familiar language and common examples is a great way to begin forging connections. Sometimes, Christians impose “sacred” manners on potential believers—manners that are not biblically or theologically normative nor culturally sensitive. If someone wants to dance to express joy in their experience with God, or if someone wants to write a poem reflecting their spiritual experience, the mission team has a great opportunity to participate and share the Good News in ways that mere words can hardly convey.

When working in an urban secular setting, it is often necessary to think outside the box when it comes to engaging brains, hearts, and hands. In my own experience, the following have been effective methods of doing just that.

*Art and Music:* Both art and music have proven to be great methods to initially engage new faces, especially in urban settings. In the past, ministries I have worked with have had great success holding art bees for both adults and children. These provide a low-stress vehicle for building relational networks, as well as for communicating the gospel (Činčala 2013:49).

Music is also a great way to form a connection. In my homeland—the Czech Republic—proclaimed atheists who were attending a class to learn

English formed a choir. During the class, the group expressed interest in learning gospel songs in the style of the movie “Sister Act.” This small group attracted others until a full gospel choir had formed—all singing praises to their Savior without even realizing it. As time went on, the group started sharing prayer requests and praying together corporately before practices and performances; some of the group met outside of choir practice for Bible studies as well (Činčala 2013:50-51; 2014; 2018a).

*Sharing stories:* While I was involved in a non-profit family outreach center for secular people, my group and I experienced God presenting himself to those who called themselves “atheists.” Such stories shared through e-mail communication or at our Gospel Choir concerts provided opportunities to witness how God loves all people and demonstrates his love to “atheists.” These stories have been well received by both believers and non-believers alike.

Sharing stories through movies or videos is also an effective tool. At the center for secular people where I was involved, some people who came to the center were openly against studying the Bible. However, they were open to attending the showing of Christian movies at the center, and afterwards shared that they had been touched by the message. It is true that you never know how God will use an experience for his glory.

*Media:* The use of technology and social media has become an increasingly important method of communication as well as relating. It provides an instant connection with others, be it nearby or globally, and offers the possibility to have open discussions and opportunities to share a word of encouragement. Young people have taken over Instagram and left Facebook to their parents. Facebook chat provides a way to personally interact with those who become open enough to invite you to be their virtual friend. It has become a natural way to share stories, pictures, and video-clips that may help secular people build their spiritual net, which may one day help them reach the point where they want to tell the world they are followers of Jesus and desire to serve the King.

## Conclusion

The urban (secular?) population is growing, while the Adventist population in cities is declining. Throughout this article, it has been emphasized that our current methods of reaching urbanites and non-churched people are insufficient. There is still much work to be done in urban areas. We must not become discouraged by this but, in fact, should be energized and motivated to find new ways of taking the Good News to these areas.

When looking at the example of Jesus, we get a picture of how we ought to interact with people in urban areas. He provided a clear model

for the church in light of his kingdom. Yet somehow, along the way, this model has fallen by the wayside. In recent years, many authors, pastors, and missionaries are turning their attention back to the original missional model established by Jesus.

The incarnational church—modeled by Jesus—not only involves meeting people exactly where they are, but demands a true sacrifice of self. God’s people must be willing to change their methods in order to meet people where they are, while putting away their pride and preconceptions of what Christian ministry should look like.

Making changes to the methods used to reach urbanites cannot be simply a cosmetic change. It is important to rethink the church’s entire missional approach. God’s people must *unlearn* everything they think they know about what church looks like, and then begin building their mission from the ground up within the current urban context.

In the Practical Application section of this paper, milestones were mentioned that allow missionaries (sent out by their mother church) to engage in meaningful missional work with secular urbanites. Each of these requires a step away from the usual methods employed by the Adventist Church, but each is more relevant to the needs and lifestyle of non-churched people living in urban settings. By employing such radical methods, the people of God will make a true impact.

The role of the church in urban ministry must be *sending out* rather than *inviting in*. By employing radical, Christ-modeled methods, mission just might “reorganize organized religious” life in the city (McLaren 2012:248).

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