

The City Is a Strategic Place for the Church's Global Mission

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I was being ordained to the gospel ministry in 1994 after becoming the pastor of a small inner-city church in Boston, Massachusetts, the previous year. The preacher for the ordination service was J. Philip Hogan, a former missionary to China and recently retired executive director for the Assemblies of God World Mission Department. At the conclusion of the service, Rev. Hogan worked his way down the line of the recently ordained, greeted me, and said, "I want you to consider becoming a foreign missionary." I replied, "I already am one—in Boston."

The city is a strategic place for the church's global mission to "make disciples of all nations." The separate categories of home missions and foreign missions do not reflect the current reality in the urban setting and in the ministry of the urban church. The rapid pace of urbanization coupled with the immigrant movements of people presents an opportunity for the church to fulfill its calling in the world.

Biblical strategy

The New Testament gives us a picture of early Christianity as primarily an urban movement. Jerusalem is the location of the preaching of the gospel among the religious pilgrims there for the Jewish feast of Pentecost.¹ This Spirit-empowered witness resulted in three thousand converts, and the subsequent persecution scattered these Christians around the Roman Empire. The result was that the message of Jesus the Messiah was carried into the Jewish communities of Greco-Roman cities.² The city provided the place for such a movement to emerge and was part of the strategy of the church's mission in the world.

Paul's apostolic ministry was focused on the cities of the Roman Empire as he made his various missionary journeys. Wayne Meeks in *The First Urban Christians* says that Pauline Christianity was entirely urban and, as a result, provided the fertile soil for its spread throughout Roman world.³ Paul makes the amazing claim in Romans 15:19 that he had preached the gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum as he planted churches in various strategic cities in the northeast Mediterranean basin.⁴

The book of Revelation was written to churches located in seven cities in Asia Minor. Richard Bauckham says the Christian world of the book of Revelation is a world of cities.⁵ While the story of creation is located in a garden, the consummation of God's work of new creation is portrayed as a city coming down out of heaven, the New Jerusalem.⁶ The mission and theology of the early church take shape within the urban environment of the first century, which invites us to look at the city as a strategic part of the ongoing mission of the church.

Like first-century Roman cities, which offered tremendous mobility to the people,⁷ the twenty-first century city has become the location of great immigrant movements of people. The Salvadoran consulate in Boston has recently moved into the building next door to Central Assembly of God Church in East Boston. It is a symbol of the relationship that exists between this neighborhood,

1 Acts 2.

2 Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 10.

3 Ibid., 8.

4 Ibid., 10.

5 Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 126.

6 Rev 21.

7 Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 17–22.

other Salvadoran people in the region, and the nation of El Salvador. Almost 6,000 Salvadoran immigrants live in East Boston.⁸

Practical reality

The immigrant movements in cities are complex, diverse, and subject to change. One member of the Central Assembly of God Church who lives in East Boston is a Kenyan man who owns farmland in Kenya on which he grows tea that he sells to the Lipton Tea Company. He traveled back to Kenya this past summer, and church in East Boston sent a donation for the Kenyan church, which is in the middle of a building project. The church in turn sent us a letter and pictures to thank us for the offering. These global business and church relationships have emerged as a result of our presence in the city. Recognizing the developing immigrant realities of the city is important for our understanding of the church's global mission and our participation in that mission.

The urban church is necessary for global mission

While the city is a strategic element in the church's global mission, the church located in the city is the instrument through which God carries out that mission. The urban place is prominent in the self-identity of the church in the New Testament. Paul writes, "To the church of God in Corinth" (1 Cor 1:2), which gives a specific city as the spatial identity of the church. Lesslie Newbigin, missionary theologian, comments, "In the New Testament, the Church is always and only designated by reference to two realities; one, God, God in Christ; and the other, the place where the Church is."⁹ An appropriate identity for Central Assembly of God Church is its location in Boston.

The Gospel of John contends that "the Word was God . . . the Word became flesh and blood and dwelt among us" (John 1:1, 14). It is the incarnation that shapes our understanding of the person of Jesus Christ and must also shape how we do urban ministry. "Those not originally from the city who choose to live among the people of the city—usually among the economically poor—often use the idea of incarnation."¹⁰ The concept of incarnation informs Christian ministry and the church in an urban setting like Boston about the importance of dwelling in the city.

Vital to the church's global mission is the presence of the church in the city. Some may try to water down the ideal, claiming that they can physically relocate outside the city but still maintain a heart for the city. In doing so, we may be practicing a kind of dualism which tries to spiritualize our relationship to the urban neighborhood. John Perkins challenges this practice with his holistic view of Christ's incarnation: "But I'm glad that Jesus didn't just relocate his heart. We are all grateful that he came to earth in the flesh."¹¹

When my wife, Barbara, and I began to discuss a calling to ministry in the city of Boston, people suggested to us that we could live in a suburban community and commute in to the city. Their stated concern was for our safety and also for the implications of raising a family in the city. While we appreciated their concern for us, we also responded to them with an explanation of the incarnation of Christ. Jesus could have commuted from heaven, but it was a necessary part of God's work of redemption for "Jesus to move into the neighborhood."¹² It is equally necessary for God's people to live in the city to be Christ's body in the city and the world. While the church must identify with the neighborhood where it is located, it must also understand its interconnected and holistic relationship with the city, region, and world.

8 Boston Redevelopment Authority Publication 610-1, *Imagine All the People* (Boston: City of Boston, 2009), 12.

9 Lesslie Newbigin, "On Being the Church for the World," *Lesslie Newbigin/Missionary Theologian: A Reader*, compiled by Paul Weston (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 132.

10 Jude Tiersma, "What does it mean to be incarnational when we are not the Messiah?" *God So Loves the City*, ed. Charles Van Engen and Jude Tiersma (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1994), 9.

11 Ibid.

12 John 1:14, *The Message*.

While Paul writes in 1 Corinthians, “To the church of God in Corinth,” he continues with, “to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours” (1 Cor 1:2). Paul writes to a particular church in a particular city, and, at the same time, he writes with a sense that they are connected to the global church. Paul displays an intuitive awareness of the church in Corinth’s living system.

Understanding the city’s living system

Doug Hall has defined a living system as “an orderly, highly complex, and highly interrelated arrangement of living components that work together to accomplish a high level goal when in proper relationship to each other.”¹³ My body is a living system. The body of Christ in a city is a living system. A city is a living system.

Our tendency is to view the world in fragmented, isolated pieces of reality rather than as the interactive, holistic creation God designed. This affects the way that we look at cities in all their complexity, along with the relationship to the surrounding region and the world. Hall challenges this fragmented view of the city when he examines common mental models of space:

When I talk about *space*, I mean the area that contains everything in the universe and extends in all directions. In our Western culture, we tend to break all of creation, seen and unseen, into fragmented, distinct (in the sense of unconnected and discrete), and definable entities, and we try to do ministry separately in each area. We assume each distinct cultural and geographical “turf” is very separate from every other. We may think of our neighborhood as very discrete place, our church as very distinct from other churches, and persons within the church as having definable roles. We think that ministry is done by individuals in separate particular spaces that are not connected to what is done in other places. We don’t really see how our church or its ministry is directly affected by the broader world.¹⁴

The church must dwell in and identify with a particular place, but must do that with a holistic view that also sees the connection and interaction with the city, region, and world.

The natural world offers us some models of space that can help us to better understand the relationship between the neighborhood, city, and the larger living system. Hall gives this example of the relationship of an individual tree to the larger forest:

In a living system, every tree is a part of a forest, which is part of a broader ecosystem that makes individual life possible. When my activities are done appropriately in a small place that is in tune with how broad social dynamics work, those dynamics will take what is done and spread it through the entire system, because everything is interrelated in space. We cannot change something in one place without dealing with its total context, which created what it is.¹⁵

Like the tree in its relationship with the forest, an individual congregation cannot be isolated from the larger body of Christ or from its environment. An individual neighborhood cannot be isolated from the rest of the city. A city cannot be isolated from a country or even the rest of the world. Health and vitality of a local place are related to the health and vitality of the whole.

As we become aware of this interconnectedness, we can begin to learn and work within the larger system. Hall recognizes that the city can reach the world in the pattern of Acts 1:8. This would not happen because of some plan to do it, but because the city is interconnected with the world.¹⁶ Our small urban church in East Boston has parishioners located in nine different local

13 Douglas A. Hall, Judy Hall, and Steve Daman, *The Cat and the Toaster* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), xxiv.

14 *Ibid.*, 296.

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Ibid.*

communities with people from twenty-three different countries. While we have an identity as a church in Boston, we must also pay attention to the regional and global relationships that we have and discover a way to do Christian mission in harmony with that reality.

In the New Testament, the city was a significant part of the way the church's mission was accomplished. Doug Hall suggests that the Apostle Paul saw the city as an organism with a living system designed by God, which would spontaneously export Christianity to the region around the city.¹⁷ In Central Assembly of God Church, we are in relationship with people from countries in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Europe.¹⁸ These relational networks extending to those places through friendship and family are potential avenues for Christian mission from East Boston to the world.

One member of Central Assembly of God Church is a pastor from Angola. This past summer, some Angolan pastors came to visit him in Boston. We met together, and I discovered that they are now in ministry in Europe among the African diaspora community there. Recently, they have invited me to go to France and Belgium to teach other ministers and to preach in the church. Here is an example of these natural connections between Boston, Angola, France, and Belgium. This is an outgrowth of the city's living system and holds great possibilities for the church's global mission.

Potential for counterproductivity

It is possible for a church or organization, though motivated by love, to act in a counterproductive way as it engages its global reality. My daughter, who is a freshman at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts, recently heard a chapel speaker talk about the benevolent work of Thom's Shoes. This shoe company has promoted to its customers a program in which they will donate a pair of shoes to a person in Africa for each pair of Thom's Shoes sold.

The effort was thought to be successful in that many African people have received shoes, but the unintended consequence is that many African shoemakers have been put out of business. The local Africans are not buying shoes, since they now have free ones. We must be aware of the potential for counterproductivity in our thinking about the church's global mission.

We have three immigrant pastors from Liberia, Angola, and Uganda who now attend Central Assembly of God Church. They all are recognized as leaders by the church in their countries, but they have not all had the opportunity to receive formal biblical and theological education. Recently, we have all met to discuss this need and the beginning of a class for these pastors to provide training in biblical exegesis and hermeneutics in an interactive class environment. With the potential of counterproductivity in mind, our concern was to develop an educational setting in conjunction with these African pastors rather than simply to offer a class for them. This class began in November 2011. We are open to pastors and Christian workers from other churches participating in this biblical and theological educational opportunity, which is affordable and accessible.

Doing global mission in harmony with the city's living system

Given the possibility of unintended, counterproductive, long-term results, we ought to engage in Christian mission with humility and openness to learning. Learning about the city's living system that then leads us to action must take place from within the system. We cannot impose a "vision" on a living system from outside without negatively affecting the system.

A young missionary came to Boston to plant a church using a ministry model that focused on outreach to children by doing action-packed events in local parks, gathering a crowd, and

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁸ The people are from Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, Liberia, Angola, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Brazil, Philippines, Japan, South Korea, Haiti, St. Kitts, Nevis, Spain, Switzerland, Italy, and Argentina.

then preaching to the people. Initially, the ministry attracted crowds of children to the events, but it was not as successful in bringing those children into the church. The financial supporters were looking for quick numerical results, which brought added pressure to the ministry. The stress became overwhelming, the young minister fell into sin, and the ministry was dissolved. The missionary came with a “vision” that he imposed on the system, and the long-term result was counterproductive.

Team learning is a model that provides support and dynamic interaction for the ongoing learning process. A small group or leadership team in a church may meet together regularly to learn about the city using all the available resources. It is important for the group to learn to function as a learning team.¹⁹ The team’s learning should emerge out of their experience of dwelling in the city, which provides the foundation for understanding the living system. The social sciences, published studies, and government information can contribute to our knowledge. Relationships and conversations with a wide variety of people in the city give opportunity for deepening and broadening the learning. This calls us to a lifelong commitment to our education about the city. The work of learning prepares us to participate in the church’s global mission in harmony with the city’s living system.

A danger in our efforts to learn about the city is our inclination to see things in a separate and fragmented way. We must find a way to see the city in all its complexity, but to keep in mind the whole picture. “Our conscious minds are capable of processing seven variables at a time.”²⁰ This limitation in seeing and understanding the complexity of a city leads us to reduce the whole to a smaller, more manageable part and then begin to operate out of that narrow perception. When approaching the task of the church’s global mission, we might hear people make recommendations like, “All you need to do is _____.” Fill in the blank with any number of options, such as have more prayer, raise more missionary giving, recruit more missionaries, or a number of other possibilities. The result is still the reduction of the complexity of the task to simplistic categories. As a result, we miss seeing the whole picture.

Another challenge in our learning is our mental models about the city and the task of the church’s global mission. Mental models are “deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action.”²¹ Our mental models are often subconscious, but shape how we see the world around us. Much like the lenses in a pair of glasses, a mental model allows us to see the world, but is not part of our conscious awareness as we see the scene before us. Sometimes our mental models are faulty and do not give us a true picture of what is there.

Only as we see reality through other lenses can we realize that our mental models of the city are not clearly in focus with the truth. Some years ago, I held a mental model of the church’s global mission that focused primarily on giving money to a centralized missions department to send missionaries overseas. The Assemblies of God national office published the missionary giving of each district in the United States, and the Spanish districts were among the bottom in financial giving. My mental model of missions led me to think that these Spanish churches were not doing much for the church’s global mission. One day, I had lunch with David Martinez, pastor of Tabernáculo Evangélico Asambleas de Dios in Revere, Massachusetts, and heard that this church had planted twenty-five churches in Central America. My previous mental model was not accurate at all. This immigrant, Spanish-speaking church was functioning within the living system of the Boston area and was actually doing missions in a dynamic way that I had been unable to see.

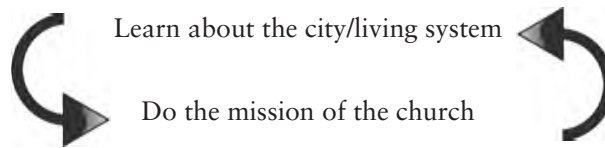
A posture of learning becomes the context for our doing the mission of the church. We need to learn about the city’s living system and how we can function in harmony with that system. We need

19 Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 9–11.

20 Hall, *The Cat and the Toaster*, 147.

21 Hall, *The Cat and the Toaster*, 89.

to see our faulty mental models of viewing the city and the church's mission. This process becomes a kind of learning-doing-learning method of involvement.



Learning prepares us to do the mission, which is then followed by continued learning and evaluation, which further guides our doing.

One issue that we will contend with is our willingness to be patient through this process. Our American tendency is “hurry up and do something.” The time and energy given to learning and evaluation may seem to some like a waste of time in comparison to the real task of doing the mission of the church. Yet the responsibility of understanding a city's living system and then acting in harmony with that system is a complex one that requires our diligent and faithful work. In our hurry to do something, we may initially produce what seem to be positive results that are in fact counterproductive over time.

We must be concerned with “the fruit that lasts” in order to do the church's global mission in harmony with the city's living system. Jesus says to his disciples, “I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last (John 15:16).” Short-term results can fool us because they may initially appear to be successful, but over time are counterproductive. There is great pressure in churches and missions organizations for quick success. Our concern for “the fruit that lasts” will challenge us to continue to evaluate and learn and be willing to make corrections in the way we do mission.

To do global mission in concert with the city's living system calls us to follow the Christian way of repentance. In response to the message of the kingdom, Jesus called people to repent (Matt 4:17), which means to change direction.²² Repentance is a way of life of continuing to turn toward the kingdom. Not only individuals, but also organizations concerned with the church's global mission must be open to repent and change direction. We may learn that we have been operating with a faulty mental model. This awareness calls for repentance and adopting a more redemptive model of ministry. This will prepare us for church and ministry transformation.

We must learn how the city relates with the rest of the world. This learning calls us to build humble relationships with the immigrant community in the city, including the immigrant church. Our concern is to see how the city is already connected to the nations of the world and what is already happening as a result of these global connections. In these existing relationships and connections, the church in the city may learn how to participate in the city's living system to do the global mission of the church.

Prayer is critical to the participation of the urban church in global mission. We must pray the prayer of the blind beggar along the road. When Jesus came near, he cried out, “Son of David, have mercy on me.” When Jesus asked him what he wanted, the blind man responded, “I want to see” (Luke 18:35–42). In our efforts to understand the city's living system, we are blind. We have faulty mental models. May Jesus heal our blindness.

Jesus said, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). We are a people dependent on Jesus to understand a city's living system and to participate in the church's global mission in a fruitful way.

22 N. T. Wright, *Matthew For Everyone*, vol. 1. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 30.

God chooses weak things and uses them to do his work in the world.²³ Having been given sight, we pray that God's Spirit would give us power to be witnesses to the ends of the earth.

The city is a strategic place for the church's global mission, and the urban church is uniquely positioned to participate in that mission. This kind of ministry calls for humble learners who are committed to live and work in the midst of the city and its complexity. The missionary challenge that J. Philip Hogan presented to me at my ordination service is being answered, but in different and surprising ways. Urban ministry practitioners and urban churches are doing global mission through the city's living system if we only have eyes to see.

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²³ 1 Cor 1:27.