



Urbanization and Evangelism: A Global View¹

RAY BAKKE

*Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary
Wynnewood, Pennsylvania*

I WANT YOU TO PICTURE AN IMAGE THAT COMES FROM PSALM 107. IN THE PSALM, people are hungering and thirsting and crying in the desert, in parched paths of life; they cry out to the Lord and the Lord answers their prayer. He leads them from the north, the south, the east, and the west to a city to dwell in. Psalm 107 portrays what I see happening worldwide. We are living in the midst of the greatest migration in human history.

Picture the world in motion: the southern hemisphere is coming north, east is coming west, and on all six continents migrations are to the city. In 1900 about eight percent of the world's population lived in sizable cities. As we approach the year 2000, over 50 percent of this earth—over three billion people—will live in world-class cities. We aren't prepared for that. Most of our mission industry, most

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RAY BAKKE is professor of urban mission; he is also executive director of International Urban Associates, Chicago.

By the year 2000, over 50% of the earth's population will live in world-class cities, whereas most Christian mission efforts still think of crossing oceans and jungles to spread the gospel to tribal people. The goal of Christian mission today is not so much people who are geographically distant as those who are culturally distant.

of the ministries that many of us represent, are still thinking in terms of a tribal world, a world where we cross oceans and deserts and jungles to get to the lost groups of people. There are, indeed, still about a billion people who are geographically distant from existing churches, so we will need traditional ministries on into the future. But far more than two billion of the world's non-churched people are no longer geographically distant from the church, they are culturally distant. They live in the large cities of the world.

These cities are like gigantic magnets attracting people. We use two definitions. By "urbanization" we refer to the city as magnet. Urbanization pulls people in from rural areas. By "urbanism" we refer to the city as a transformer, transmitter, and magnifier of culture. Even though Detroit or many other cities are losing population in the city center as the city spreads out, urbanism will not go away. The entire planet is becoming highly urbanized. There is no place to escape anymore. These days the people running away from Los Angeles are running into the people running away from places like Chicago, somewhere near Colorado Springs. There is no place to hide from what I am describing: a migration that is happening on all six continents.

I. A WORLD TOUR

In the epistle to Philemon, the second shortest book in the New Testament, we have a marvelous dialogue about an intercontinental refugee named Onesimus. Paul, in a beautiful little piece of reflection, gives us a hermeneutical window to look at global migration. He says to Philemon regarding the slave who had stolen money, run away from Asia to get lost in the European crowd in Rome, found Christ in Rome, and is now coming back to Asia to assume some leadership and to integrate a local house church, where slaves would now join non-slaves in the fellowship of the church—Paul says, "Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever" (v. 15). As I look at the international migrant streams, we need Paul's hermeneutical window.

Imagine an urban tour of London: the East End is basically becoming Asian today; South London is by and large black—West Indian, Jamaican, Ugandan; West London, outside the theater district and outside the Westminster Palace area, is becoming largely Arab. The British Empire once included 52 nations, but now all 52 nations live in London. I call this the "empire strikes back" syndrome.

The British are still not prepared for all this. Neither are the mission realities of the United Kingdom. There are now more Muslims throughout the cities of the United Kingdom than there are Baptists and Methodists combined. In cities like Bradford, near Leeds, there are 80 Asian populations. The churches have been recycled; many of them are now mosques or Sikh temples. Mission no longer goes one way; there is a reverse mission coming back to the United Kingdom.

Move on to Paris. In the south of the city, the 14th Arrondissement is incredibly Algerian. France once ruled 46 countries, 26 African nations and another 20

countries on five continents—440 million French-speaking people in very diverse places on five continents. Now, all of those five continents are coming back to France. In France now there are very heated debates about what to do with the col-oration and pluralization of French society. The French are not ready for this; the mission of the French people is not ready for this.

Consider the cities of Germany. A hundred years ago as part of the *Drang nach Osten*—the push to the east—the Germans built a railroad to the Bosphorus. Now hundreds of thousands of Turks and many others live in the cities of Germany. About 50,000 Yugoslavs live in Sweden. Or consider Norway, St. Olav’s Catholic Parish in the center of Oslo: 97 nations can be found in that one parish—nearly one-half of the nations of the world. (197 nations came to the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta.) A more dramatic pluralization of what once was a homogenous community and society could not be imagined. I assure you, the Norwegian church is not ready for this.

It may surprise you that one million Japanese now live in São Paulo, Brazil. You cannot get further away from north Pacific Japan than south Atlantic Brazil without starting to come back around the other way. How do a million Japanese get to São Paulo? Some 80 million Chinese live outside of China. While we have been focused all these years on how to get the mission into China—the Siocrode mission of 615 A.D. to Baghdad, the Nestorian Church, the papal mission of Marco Polo, the Jesuit mission of Beteo Risi, the nineteenth-century Protestant mission—80 million Chinese have been scattered by the Lord of history into cities all over the world.

We are living in that day of incredible global migration. Here in St. Paul, 25 percent of the public school children are Hmong. They don’t even have a country of their own, but they have a big chunk of St. Paul in neighborhoods not far from Luther Seminary.

II. WHAT IS GOD DOING?

The whole world has come to the cities. When we moved to Chicago in 1965, we discovered that there were 63 nations in the high school where our children would eventually attend. They were teaching in 11 different languages, and over 50 percent of the children were foreign-born. That’s when I began to ask the theological question: “What is God doing?” I know the migration theory about push and pull factors, but the theological issue remains: “Why at this time in history are the nations coming to the cities? What is God doing in this massive migration of the world?”

I was helped by Frederick Norwood, whose study begins with Abraham and the exiles in Babylon and shows the diaspora movements in the history of the church.² Other scholarly works helped me to discover that from a theological and pastoral perspective, refugees are not victims, they are missionaries. I remember

²Frederick Norwood, *Strangers and Exiles: A History of Religious Refugees* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969).

reading the Gospel one Christmas and realizing that this story was about an Asian-born baby, born in a borrowed barn, who became an African refugee. In that simple story, Jesus is in touch with the greatest migration in human history, because over half of the babies born in the world are born in Asia, and over half of the world's 30 million refugees are Africans.

I began to think about the martyrdom of those innocent children in Bethlehem—a whole village full of babies died for Jesus before he could die for them on the cross. In Chicago, one hospital reported two years ago that 46 percent of the babies that lived to be born were damaged: crack addicted, HIV positive, or suffering from fetal alcohol syndrome. The damage came in some way by the sins of adults. Surely, the Jesus of the Christmas story understands the pain of crack and fetal-alcohol babies. Biblical stories look different in an urban context.

Moses' mother was a classic "public aid mom." She had an illegal baby and her husband was not in the picture. She makes a little boat, floats her child down the Nile River, gets him rescued, and gets paid for raising him. She beat the system! According to Stephen in Acts 7, Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. He had gone to palace school to learn pharaonic culture.

Then he had an internship in the desert, where he studied public health and primitive communities, sheep culture, desert language and literature. God made him practice with sheep in a bad neighborhood before he would trust him with people in a bad neighborhood. Moses led a mud-making migrant group out into the worst neighborhood in the middle east. They were on "food stamps" called manna for forty years. Moses did human development, leadership development, community development, and economic development. As I read the Pentateuch from my perspective, the stories come alive in a different way!

I discovered that we do have a theology as big as the city. The Hebrew word for city (עִיר) occurs 1090 times in the Old Testament, πόλις 160 times in the New Testament. We find 142 cities in the scriptures, some mentioned hundreds of times. One can list 25 kinds of urban ministry mentioned in the historical books alone. The Apostle Paul only went to cities, but he never approached any city the same way twice. There was indeed a great deal of grist for theology and for the practice of ministry as I began to look at the cities of the world.

III. THE CHALLENGES OF THE CITY

But the cities present amazing challenges. Take, for example, the demographic challenge: the sheer pluralism of all of these nations now living in a confined space. An extraordinary amount of sociology is required to exegete a community. Everybody who comes, comes with sending-culture baggage. Whether in Cairo, Paris, or London, pastors must sort out the agendas of the sending culture while trying to pastor the agendas of the host culture.

Further, cities are not neutral: they package people in certain ways. When John Kennedy was elected President in 1960, he had made a deal with Lyndon

Johnson to deliver the Baptist (or Bible-belt) vote to a Catholic president. My church in Seattle was in the midst of a building project at the time. The first thing that the Department of Defense did under Robert McNamara's leadership was to withdraw the biggest government contract that Boeing, in Seattle, had ever had. The contract was rescinded and given to Lockheed and General Dynamics in the South. My entire congregation was unemployed almost overnight.

That made me realize that cities are not neutral. A political decision to shift capital, made 3,000 miles away in Washington, DC, had unemployed my congregation and impacted my ministry. I knew then that I had to pay attention to things beyond the parish in order to function in the parish.

When you ask people in the city who they are, they tell you what they do. When Boeing threw away my congregation, they didn't want to come to church because they didn't know who they were. I realized then why blue-collar workers don't come to church most of the time. They can't compete with the pastor's identity. And so the world's chronic economic, unemployment, and under-employment issues are not primarily economic issues. They comprise an identity crisis. All of these issues, along with race and culture issues, impact the pastor in the urban congregation, forcing him or her to grapple with a whole new understanding of the nature and mission of the church in these contexts.

Consider the ecclesial challenge: churches on every corner offer their own version of the gospel. Manila presents this in exaggeration. In the Philippines there are 7,100 islands. The missionaries, back in 1918, had a comity agreement. They decided to split up the islands, and so there became Baptist islands, Lutheran islands, Methodist islands, Anglican islands; everyone got to be catholic in their own island. Every island had its own hymnal, its own Bible, its own liturgy, and its own practice of ministry. But since World War II, all of those islands have been sending people to metro Manila. Now, on every corner of every neighborhood is a church with a Bible that is different from the neighboring church's Bible. The pastors, normally trained in the barrios, don't understand this. They internalize their inadequacies. They were not prepared for this in Cebu, where they went to Bible College. Now they come to metro Manila to pastor a flock that includes all the proliferation of the kingdom of God. They have no idea which Bible is correct; but they think that their own must be, and that their own hymnal is correct, which means that everybody else's must be suspect. So the pastors adopt authoritarian modes of ministry, keeping the church busy every night of the week so that nobody can be contaminated by being in contact with any other Christians. The churches pass like ships in the night. The bigger the city, the less they do in evangelism; they program and over-program their members so they won't leak away and be contacted by other denominations. It's a massive problem on six continents! How do we prepare pastors to move in and build bridges of hope for these kinds of places?

The theological issues are tremendously difficult. In the past, we struggled with interdenominational questions. Today, it's interfaith questions. Rev. B. Her-

bert Martin, pastor on Chicago's south side and a member of my urban support group, has for ten years had a Monday night Bible study for men. About a hundred men come to a "cousins" study: for black Jews, black Christians, and black Muslims. They are all the children of Abraham, and they all live in the neighborhood. I've never heard of anybody else who has what he calls a cousins Bible study. They come together and read the Old Testament, and the word is that many Muslims have decided to follow Jesus—in a cousins Bible study. When I was in seminary, nobody told us we could do that! But Martin Kahler, the German missiologist, was right when he told us back in 1908 that "mission is the mother of theology."³

Mission is forcing us, as it gets closer to mid-America, to re-invent the church and to rethink theology and mission practice. Having been in and around seminaries for 30 years, I can assure you that we are not ready for this. We are producing pastors who are clinicians, very often "Rogerian," which, when it comes to counseling in my neighborhood, is a little like rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. Somebody has to patch that leaky boat. We need missiologists, sociologists, demographers who can deal with the great issues of mission and evangelization, and we are not getting those out of most of our seminaries. Our seminaries are autobiographically preparing people to move into the narrow stream of whiteness and middle-classness, but while that remains a major stream of Americana, it comprises only 13 percent of God's earth. Eighty-seven percent of our world is non-white. We desperately need some models within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and other denominations to lift up as examples of people taking risks and preparing ministers for this new reality. Seminaries have done well at being the memory bank of the church, far less well at being the research and development unit for the future.

Cities present enormous pastoral challenges. How does a pastor build a sustainable spirituality in the city? How do you raise your children there? What do you do when everything you do is cross-cultural? Missionaries had furloughs and support systems that urban pastors do not.

IV. URBAN MINISTRY SPECIALIZATIONS

Urban ministry has developed areas of specialization, at least five. One is work with the at-risk people groups. At-risk people are children damaged pre-birth; they are street kids, abused kids, abandoned kids. They come from broken families; they are burdened with addictions and dysfunctionalities of all kinds. One classic study suggests we can help only 15 percent of the homeless population by the traditional "soup, soap, and salvation" methodologies of rescue missions.⁴ Basically, 85 percent of the homeless population in this country are now layered with

³Martin Kahler, *Schriften zur Christologie und Mission* (1908; reprint Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1971). Cited in David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991) 489.

⁴Alice Baum and Donald Burnes, *A Nation in Denial: The Truth about Homelessness* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993).

addictions, and we will need new strategies for long-term incarnational work with people. Are we ready for this? It's much easier to move into the areas of success and upward mobility and work with the traditional people who have paid our bills and built our churches; and I'm afraid that's where we are going. But the explosion of mission is in the other direction, and I don't think we are ready for it.

A second area of specialization involves at-risk communities. The ministry of John Perkins and others has produced the Christian Community Development Association, a group of denominations that are targeting the last, least, and lost neighborhoods in America. Every November two to three thousand people meet to share their expertise and their struggles to plant churches in the absolute armpits of this country. Fortunately, this kind of movement is happening around the world as well. For me, the greatest sign of hope in the middle east is in Cairo's Makada Mountain garbage dump where a Willow-Creek model of the Coptic Orthodox Church exists. About 10,000 people came recently to a Thursday night Bible study, the majority under 30. The people have literally carved a cave that seats 10,000 people out of the mountain of Cairo's garbage. It's a church. Hundreds and thousands of young people are coming out of the Coptic centers of Egypt and bringing their Muslim friends to hear the gospel. People are working in the biggest and worst slums in cities around the world. People are deliberately choosing to move their ministries to those places.

A third specialization is the multiethnic and multilingual ministries. My son's church in Chicago ministers every week in 12 different languages. We need churches today that function like hospitals and supermarkets and police stations. They have to be open 24 hours, which means we need day pastors and night pastors speaking all different languages. My son's church has banners on its walls in those 12 different languages, so as soon as people step in they see "Jesus Christ" in their own language—they know that the church has a ministry for them. We didn't get trained, when I went to seminary, to pastor the world's nations in one parish. The church was multilingual the day it began at Pentecost, but did not become multicultural until Antioch. There were many hurdles to get over before the church could get from merely speaking the languages to building the multiethnic pastoral team that Barnabas put together in Antioch. That city-center model, which invented foreign missions in Antioch, is the model we need again in the center of our modern cities.

Another specialization involves laity in the marketplace. In the urban parish, it is not enough to have a busy program at the church. We need to equip people to move into the subsectors of the city: the court system, the advocacy roles. We need to send people into politics, because the laws are unfair and unjust. We need Christians who will articulate the gospel in the business world. We need people to serve in convention businesses, in theater, in the arts, in all of the subcultures of the city. So pastors have to be the equippers of the laity and commission them to move into the marketplace.

And then of course, there are those specializations where we take the functions of the true church—worship, discipleship, stewardship, fellowship, and service—and adapt their forms for the urban places where God has placed us. My friend George has six worship services. At 6:00 Sunday morning, George is in a robe, standing behind a pulpit, and the Holy Spirit is in the pipe organ. At the second service, the Holy Spirit is in the guitar, George has no robe, and the people are all over the place. The third service is the children and family service: children and their parents do all the ushering, share in the lectionary readings, act in a drama, the “Littlest Angels” choir sings, the Holy Spirit is in the piano, and the sermon deals with a family issue; but it’s the same lectionary text. The fourth service is a teenage rock service: the Holy Spirit is in the praise band, hundreds of kids are present. The fifth service is another afternoon contemporary service. The sixth service is what George calls “the Alka Seltzer service,” for all the losers in the neighborhood: the ushers are just out of jail, just off drugs, or struggling with addictions; it’s the church of the twelve-step groups. I heard a young man stand up in that worship service and say, “When I came to you this past year, I was a child molester, and you knew it. And you have taken me in now, and you’ve become my family. And now with your help and prayers, I’m going to go back to California and try to find my wife and my family and ask their forgiveness.” I tried to remember if I’d ever been in a church service on a Sunday anywhere in the world where somebody could stand up and say, “I’m a child molester,” and be hugged by everybody before he could get out the door. The good news is that there are city churches doing this kind of ministry. They are on the frontier of mission. It is not nice or pretty or comfortable. But that is where the gospel is in the city. It is about crucifixion in places that we don’t like to be.

V. FIVE THESES

Let me conclude with five theses:

First, the frontier of mission has shifted. It is no longer geographically distant, it is culturally distant. A hundred years ago we sent the missionaries to the nations to look for the cities. Today, you go to the cities and you find the nations. The defining nature of the city is not inner city versus outer city. Only in the United States do the poor live in the city and the rich live in the suburbs. Everywhere else in the world, the closer you get to center city, the richer you are—especially places like Paris. The old inner-city/outer-city paradigm does not work. Nor does it work to say that the city is black and the suburbs are white. The biggest cities are neither black nor white. Tokyo is yellow, Mexico City is brown. The biggest cities in the world do not have race problems as we define them. The American ways of defining city as black or white, as urban or suburban just don’t fit. We need a missiological definition of the city. The city is the place where the nations are gathering. And therefore, the pastors who are put in the city must be missiologically trained. We

would never think of sending a person to a tribe without language and cultural study.

Urban neighborhoods are now infinitely more complex than tribal cultures. They are kaleidoscopically restructuring themselves, and we have no way to prepare pastors before they enter these neighborhoods. We grind up pastors in the city by not giving them the kinds of orientation and the tools they need to work cross-culturally. So, my first thesis is that urban ministry is cross-cultural. The nations have come to the cities, so we have to have a global perspective. We have to move missiology from the fringe to the core of the curriculum, and we have to read scripture from that perspective. We have to study the history of the church from that cross-cultural perspective (more like Latourette than Williston Walker). We will study Stephen Neill and his missiology, wrestling with the church's crossing cultures and the impact of those new churches. We will study Benedict's Rule and the monastic movements, which were engines of economic development without outside funding. We will look at the way lay people built monasteries, and how the Cluniac reform movements nurtured those Benedictine movements. We will look at all the same things, but we will see them from a different perspective as we prepare urban pastors for a whole new day when the nations live in the cities. All the nations of the world are now within the shadow of the spires of Lutheran churches.

Thesis number two: we will have to do a dramatic gospel and culture inventory. Consider Acts 10, Peter's confession, which I call the climax of Pentecost—the second conversion of the preacher of Pentecost. Peter, who had followed Christ and seen all the miracles and heard all the sermons, denied Christ under pressure three times, but was forgiven by the risen Christ. Peter, who preached at Pentecost and was apparently filled with the Spirit, was still struggling with things like little kids bringing ham sandwiches to Sunday school picnics. The Peter of Acts 10 was still culturally chauvinistic. He was ethnocentric, still a benign racist.

We all need Peter's conversion. My oldest son brought home a boy from school; we fed him for six months, and then we adopted him. Now in my family we have two Brians, a white Brian and a black Brian. That meant we had to change everything: our vacations, our food, our discipline patterns. To incorporate another culture into Scandinavian tradition was agonizing. My wife is a concert pianist with a doctorate in worship and art. Her whole repertoire was European. It forced her to look at rag and blues and jazz in a whole new way. It will not be easy.

My favorite writing of Luther is the essay in which he exegetes the Jerusalem council and the seven ecumenical councils of the early church.⁵ Luther realizes that the church was perilously close to saying that the way to the cross is through the gate of the synagogue. You have to become culturally Jewish in order to become Christian. Peter was still struggling with that issue. Like a lot of Eurocentric Christians, we, too, would like to keep the threshold high to preserve our northern Euro-

⁵Martin Luther, *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), *Luther's Works*, vol. 41, ed. Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 9-178.

pean culture and values. And we say “You can come to the cross and you can come to Jesus, but you have to step over that threshold of Johann Bach and the *Augsburg Confession* and, along with that, a European cultural tradition that is extremely significant for us.” Like Vatican II, we must sort out all the issues in the light of a global church. Every generation needs to do this. Luther was right. His 1539 essay is a seminal piece of literature on the homework we have to do on the culture/gospel inventory.

Thesis three: the image of the pastor has to change. We have the image of preacher, educator, counselor, and we have had the CPE captivity of the curriculum for about 20 years now. We need to add the image of missiologist. It’s an integrative discipline. It’s not made out of whole cloth. It’s a way of looking at traditional disciplines and social courses and documents in new ways.

The fourth thesis raises the question about the barriers to effective urban ministry. I used to think that if churches and pastors all over the world had the right information and the right motivation, we could reach the cities with the gospel of Jesus Christ. And so I set out to do that. By the time I ended up in Cairo in 1982 with about 55 pastors on a retreat, I realized that I was naive and wrong. I started doing surveys, and I thought the barriers to mission were the big, bad cities.⁶ Having mastered something of the culture of cities, I thought that if I could just distill that and help pastors get the right motivation spiritually, we would then reach cities. But 90 percent of the barriers to reaching cities are not in the city at all; they are inside our churches, things like, “Our bishop would never let us get away with that,” or “They’ll call us liberal if we do that,” or “We can’t do that, the seminary never prepared me for that.” The barriers are inside our structures; the heads, the knowledge base, the intimidation factors of our church are the things that keep us from reaching cities.

My fifth and final thesis is that there is a fundamental difference between Jesus Christ and Ann Landers. She offers advice, we offer news. Advice, by the nature of the case, is something you must do. If it works, we say that it was good advice. Advice is patronizing: we give advice, you receive our advice.

We are not in the cities in the advice business. We are in the cities in the news business. The news is that God has in Jesus Christ done something for you on the cross, and that the risen Christ and the empty cross are reminders that God as the ascended Christ offers now to forgive all those who repent and believe. And we must not deny the poor the possibility of repenting from their sins. Raymond Fung, long-time evangelist for the World Council of Churches, has pointed out that the poor are not only sinners, like all of us, but more often than not, they are also the sinned against. So the doctrine of hope comes knowing forgiveness.

I believe in all those social programs that come along and open gates for people. But, if there is no gospel that says, “News, not advice! Something happened in

⁶Raymond J. Bakke, “Urban Evangelization: A Lausanne Strategy since 1980,” *International Bulletin for Missionary Research* 8/4 (1984) 149-154.

Jesus Christ and you have the possibility of new life,” then there is no hope. If people are given only hope, but then end up locked in prisons forever, that hope will eventually turn to cynicism. So we need a new partnership between the hope people and the love people, between the truth people and the grace people. We need to come alongside each other, people who are evangelists with the news and people who come with tools to set people free. We can’t do one without the other. They are two sides of a coin in the city. If we only had Colossians, we would take on all the structures of the city and reclaim the systems. If we only had Philippians, which starts with the Jesus in us, we’d be Wesleyan, and we’d work out of a personal evangelism model. But the truth is that we have them both, side by side in the New Testament. So we have an intensely personal faith, the Philippian option. We have a public faith, the Colossian option. The fact is, we have to put these two pieces of christology together to make it work in the city. And if we do, we will not only see people transformed and churches transformed, but we will also see communities and cities transformed. ⊕