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THE INDEPENDENT URBAN CHURCH

(An Educational Experiment in Kingdom Thinking)

A Paper

Presented to Dr. Bruce Kreutzer

Luther Rice Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Course

CM 530-W Educational Ministries

by

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LT 1134

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INTRODUCTION: A LITTLE HISTORY

The purpose of this paper is to elaborate the process by which the church that I pastor transitioned from a classic suburban church into an urban church. I will also discuss the resulting impact this transition had on our educational ministry. This paper will be at times somewhat reflective in that this process has not been a smooth one. We have gone through painful transitions. We have experienced the heartache of a church split in the midst of this transition and seen the hand of God graciously move us into productivity again with a uniquely different ministry.

The goal of this study is practical in nature. I hope that by doing this work and research I will be able to better organize and elucidate the various elements that comprise our urban mission field. This will allow me also to better identify the philosophy by which this ministry will operate and clarify our mission.

While this study is not exhaustive and the research material is somewhat fluid and broad in scope (everything from ultra-socialistic to emerging in nature), my hope is to carefully extract that which is relevant to a conservative evangelical urban church. In doing this, I also hope to reveal the dynamic potential of the urban mission field in America. This potential extends far beyond the boundary of the city in which we are located. Rather, it can be a paradigm for mission endeavors in urban centers throughout this nation and the world.

MISSION: TO BE BIBLICALLY SOUND, CULTURALLY DIVERSE, AND REPRESENTATIVE OF THE COMMUNITY

Our church is located on the cusp of the downtown center of Tacoma, Washington. It is a city like most American urban centers that provides for a rich diversity in ethnic, socio-economic, and moral issues. Within a mile radius of our church site one would find such contrasts as fine dining and the homeless feed, a university campus and a homeless shelter, multimillion dollar businesses and crack addicts begging on the corner. Our church lies less than a half mile from the local homeless mission. It has 53 registered sex offenders within a mile radius.¹ In 2009, 877 families were noted to be homeless in our county.² At any given time in our immediate community approximately 2000 people spent the night on the street or in the shelter.³

All of the above factors become an aspect of what our ministry seeks to service. This service is founded in the biblical understanding that all of mankind is separated from God. Whether it is because of their goodness (Isa 64.6; Mt 19.16-22), or their obvious sin (Rom 1.18-32), all have come short of His glory (Rom 3.23). It is with this understanding in mind that we approach church planting in the urban centers. We

¹ <http://www.co.pierce.wa.us> (sex offender search)

² Michael Mirra and Alice Shobe, “*Plan and a Helping of Hope Are Best Tools to Fight Homelessness*,” (published: 09/23/1012:05 am | Updated: 09/23/1010:54 am), <http://www.thenewtribune.com/2010/09/23/1352898/plan-and-a-helping-of-hope-are.html#ixzz12CBheRle>

³ <http://www.pchomelessconnect.org>

purposely educate and immerse the congregation in the philosophy that the Lord so prolifically embedded into the first church. This philosophy is that the church should reflect the cultural makeup and diversity of the community into which it is placed. This belief is biblical in its origin. We see that the Lord went to great lengths to prevent the early church from identifying with a particular culture or any other sectarian beliefs (Acts 10.34; Rom 3.22; Gal 3.28).

It is regarding the issue of diversity that we find the greatest challenge in urban church planting today. It is not that believers will not accept and acknowledge the validity of the gospel for all. Rather, it is that they seek to identify with a group with which they find comfort or conform new converts to the social culture that they have deemed to be “Christian.” This attitude has led to churches becoming more corporate than organic, and commercial (or in church growth coinage, “attractional”) rather than reproductive. The typical belief regarding church growth is as church growth specialist Aubrey Malphurs states; “Attempts to reach everyone in general will reach no one in particular. Once your church’s culture is set, you’ll exclude some people. This can’t be helped.”⁴ While this attitude may have validity in the suburban church setting, it simply could not be so in the melting pot of the urban setting. To pursue such a philosophy of church growth in this setting would be by nature, exclusive and out of context with what we see as the Biblical example.

⁴Aubrey Malphurs, *The Dynamics of Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1999), 138-139; quoted in Lillian Breckenridge, “*Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Christian Education*,” ed. Michael J. Anthony, *Christian Education: Foundations for the Twenty-first Century*, 46.

THE EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVE AND A KINGDOM PARAMETER

Dave Gibbons in his autobiographical and instructional work, *The Monkey and the Fish: Liquid Leadership for a Third-Culture Church* describes the questions that he began to ask himself as he evaluated the work that he had done pasturing one of the fastest growing churches in America. He queries regarding his church...

Were people's lives any different? Were the city and community really being transformed? Were hurt and pain really being addressed with the marginalized in our community? Were people becoming David-like in their obedience and faith? Were we forging real and stronger relationships with people who are not like us?⁵

These are questions that directly confront all churches but are all the more prominent in the urban setting. For our church, addressing them became the strategic issue shortly after moving to the inner center. We were in the inner city, in a predominantly unchurched region (the Northwest). We quickly found that door to door was not an effective means of reaching people. The reason for this is two-fold. First, the Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons are very active in urban centers and have become the face of door to door evangelism today. People have built a strong animosity toward anyone knocking at their door for religious reasons. And second, urban people suffer from what is known as "psychological overload" as a result of the stimulus in the urban areas. They are bombarded with casual relationships, from salespeople to phone solicitors. They live

⁵ Dave Gibbons, *The Monkey and the Fish: Liquid Leadership for a Third-Culture Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 61.

in locked buildings because they do not want any more casual relationships. They have no capacity for more.⁶

We had researched the so called “self actualizing” or “therapeutic” gospels and found them to be deficient and ultimately unbiblical. Also, being located in the midst of a diverse population with a high concentration of people suffering with a spirit of entitlement, it was important not to cater to the mindset of the fix-me mentality. Driscoll states it well when he says...

So in this therapeutic gospel, you use Jesus to achieve your ends, which can vary from health to wealth to emotional contentment, or whatever personal vision you have for your own glory. What hinders the fulfillment of our potential is not that we are sinners but rather that we don't love ourselves enough and don't have enough self-esteem and positive thinking. God exists to worship us, by telling us how lovable we are. In this gospel, the cross is an echo of my own great worth, since God found me so loveable and so valuable that he was willing to die for me so that I could love myself, believe in myself, and achieve my full glory.⁷

With all of this in mind, we concluded that we would seek to maintain our emphasis for didactic biblical teaching on every level. We would approach individuals, not as someone who needs to be fixed (or that we can fix) but rather as a person that the Lord wants to replace with His mind and Spirit (Phil 2.5-9; Rom 8.9-11). Our job would be to disciple people in this belief. **This meant that we would use social outreaches only as a means of presenting the gospel evangelistically and not merely as a means of doing good deeds.** Every outreach would allow for and provide the opportunity to share the gospel or we would not do it.

⁶ Ray Bakke, *The Urban Christian: Effective Ministry in Today's Urban World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987), 41-42.

⁷ Mark Driscoll, *Confessions of a Reformation Rev.: Hard Lessons from an Emerging Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 24.

This decision, by nature, separated us from the majority of religious social endeavors that tend toward the doing of good deeds without agreement as to cardinal beliefs. It allowed us to focus on the essential of sharing our faith through acts of kindness without the confusion and chaos of ecumenicalism. It also paved the way for us to establish partnerships with other organizations and ministries that shared common heart attitudes and goals, without the necessity of agreeing on all secondary issues. We defined our parameter for agreement as, “love the Lord, love His word, and love the lost.” Added to this could be the phrase, “and don’t exalt secondary doctrinal issues to the place of the primary” (we refer to this now as 3 L’s and a D). If we found an organization with this heart, we would co-labor with them. To date, we have approximately six organizations laboring under the same banner.

The next phase in the development of this philosophy was to define what it meant for us to be “kingdom minded.” This was necessary because there has been a great amount of variance and confusion surrounding this term within the ranks of evangelicalism. We first started with what it did not mean to us which led to what it truly meant to us:

- It isn’t merely a manifestation of the sign gifts from the Holy Spirit.
- It isn’t simply an outbreak of the supernatural (i.e. signs of power).
- It isn’t comprised solely by individual organizational ability or power but in corporate organic power.
- It is the recognition of the expansion of the kingdom of God through various portions under the headship of Jesus Christ the King.
- It demands that corporate gifts be submitted to the true lordship of the King.
- It demands organizational humility personified in the furtherance of the kingdom being placed primarily above the benefit of the organization.
- It entails the sharing of resources for the benefit of the kingdom.
- It places thanksgiving and praise for victory on a community wide, regional, and global scale through partnership and not merely a private organization.

With this understanding in place we could now set the parameter for our missional goals and the purpose for which we would enlist and disciple people. We sought out organizations and churches that we could partner with in the sharing of ministry assets and resources that would complement a kingdom vision for the community, region, or world. We strained these contacts through the screen of the 3 L's and a D and refined our choices with the kingdom approach. We disciple all of our congregants in the ministry of kingdom partnerships and encourage them to participate in ministries (or originate ministries) that identify with this vision.

FINDING THE “NEXUS” OF COMMUNITY MINISTRY

Indigenous Ministries with a Kingdom Purpose

In his book *The Present Future* author Reggie McNeal makes a painfully true assessment of the American church stating that:

The North American church is suffering from severe mission amnesia. It has forgotten why it exists. The church was created to be the people of God to join him in his redemptive mission for the world. The church was never intended to exist for itself. It was and is the chosen instrument of God to expand his kingdom.⁸

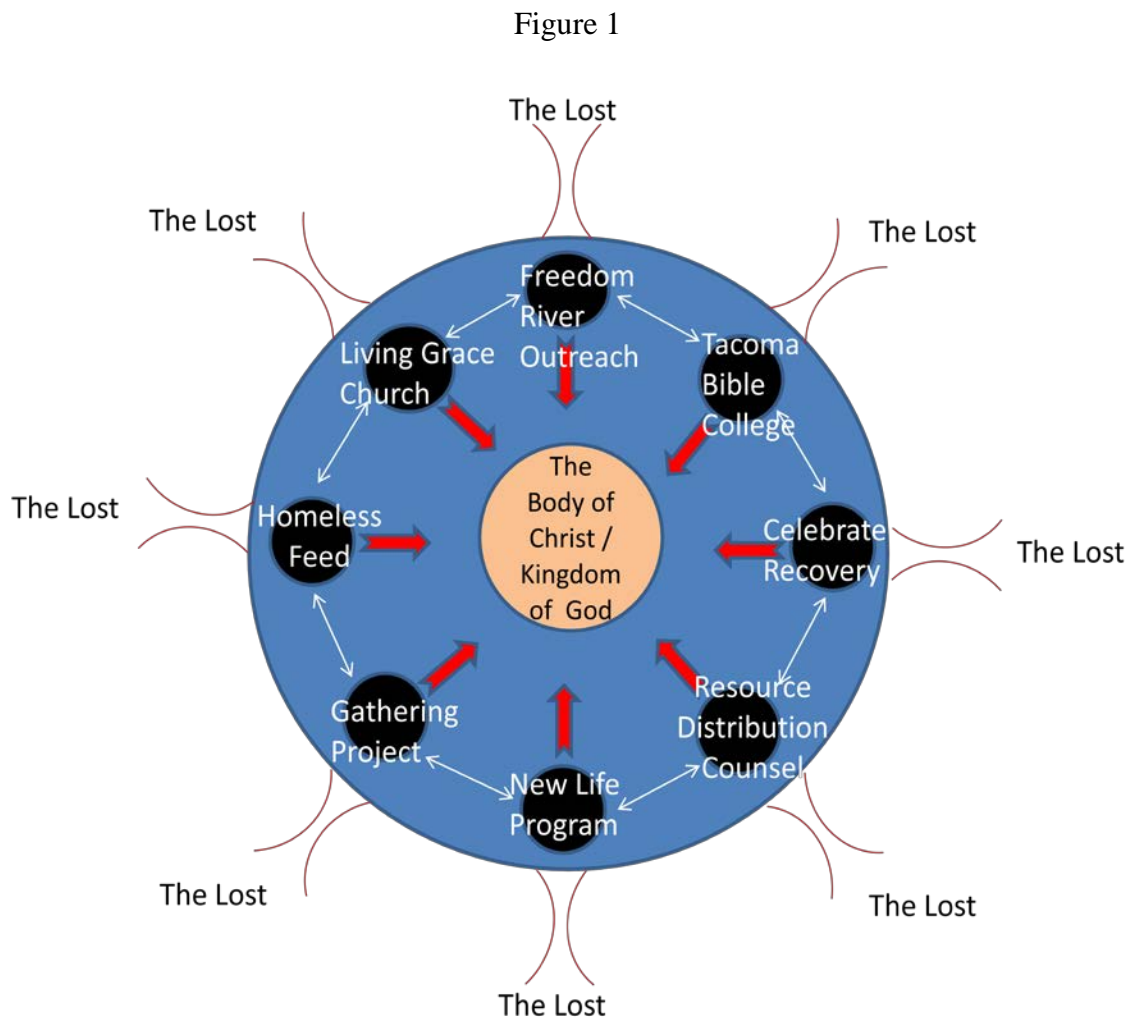
He goes on to say that the result of such thinking is that “we have built the best churches men can build, but are still waiting for the church that only God can get credit for.”⁹ The need for a clear kingdom purpose and strategic relationship between ministries and organizations of the urban center is critical to success in the midst of urban strongholds. Independence is not an option and both financial feasibility and numeric growth is nearly impossible without partnering. The only answer to this conflict (and I use this term purposefully believing that the choke hold of the urban blight is one of the enemies’ chief policies for ours and other nations) is partnerships created by the Spirit of God that revolve around the common goal of furthering the visible footprint of God’s presence in the community. For us, this commonality is the 3 L’s and a D discussed earlier. If there are leaders that are willing to set aside self interest for the betterment of the kingdom,

⁸ Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2003), 15-16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

then we can work together in the common goal of reaching our community with the gospel.

It is important to note that this attitude of agreement neither violates the individuality of the organization nor undermines its leadership. The ministries and organizations remain indigenous with their own mission and philosophical approach. The partnership shares only that which relates to the purpose of furthering the kingdom. It does not impose on individuality. An example of this ideology is shown in figure 1.



In the illustration none of the organizations or churches agree on all levels of doctrinal orientation. Some are directed toward specific social and spiritual needs such as addiction issues with the New Life Program (NLP), higher education with the Tacoma Bible College (TBC), and providing food for those families who are in need at the Resource Distribution Council (RDC). None of these organizations are of the same denominational background. All differ in organizational structure and a multitude of secondary issues. Only two are actual churches. But all are in agreement when it comes to the issue of using social ministry as a means of affecting the community, promulgating the gospel, training disciples, and bringing people into the kingdom of God.

What is not readily shown in the illustration is the cross pollination that occurs between the various organizations and churches. It was these relationships that allowed for the formation of the School of Urban Ministry (SUM), an extension of TBC. This not only provides a practical application and discipleship environment for the students as they interact with the various organizations, but it also affords them the opportunity to interact with a broad variety of ministries, with both community and international scope. This school environment and the dormitory associated with it, allowed for a transitional training environment for certain individuals coming from the NLP. When compared to the traditional method of moving these men into “clean and sober” houses, which are not Christian based, this proved to be a vital element of their further recovery and discipleship, while learning to give back and minister to others. Along with the education, SUM students are provided work opportunities within the partner organizations that provide further training in specific missional realms. For men that

have come from the NLP the opportunity to work in these environments provides on the job training in a covered and Christ-centered environment.

Guidelines for Kingdom Partnerships

Previously, we have discussed what the term “kingdom” did and did not mean to us. To review, we said that in order for an organization or ministry to participate in the partnership they must be able to agree to these basic tenets, which are:

- It isn't comprised solely by individual organizational ability or power but in corporate organic power.
- It is the recognition of the expansion of the kingdom of God through various portions under the headship of Jesus Christ the King.
- It demands that corporate gifts be submitted to the true lordship of the King.
- It demands organizational humility personified in the furtherance of the kingdom being placed primarily above the benefit of the organization.
- It entails the sharing of resources for the benefit of the kingdom.
- It places thanksgiving and praise for victory on a community wide, regional, and global scale through partnership and not merely a private organization.

While there are many models for urban work being forwarded and discussed today, it remains the responsibility of the individual urban church to fashion a strategy that will uniquely serve its community. This should be a “strategic plan and specific outreach program based upon the universal principles which fit our urban context, philosophy of ministry, biblical convictions, and individual/group resources.”¹⁰ It becomes important that all of the organizations and churches that choose to participate in this endeavor agree to, and impart these basic ideals to their respective congregants and workers. The measure that the above principles are not honored will be the measure of potential stress introduced into the partnership. This does not mean that every organization or church loses their indigenous identity. The agreement affects only the

¹⁰Baptist Bible College and Seminary. (1997; 2003). *Journal of Ministry and Theology Volume 4* (vnp.4.2.129-4.2.130). Galaxie Software.

corporate interests to which they are committed. Each organization is independently governed and establishes its own unique vision for many elements of its church or non-profit corporation. They will seek to expand and grow in a variety of ways that have no relationship to the partnership. But with regard to the kingdom endeavors mutually agreed to they are bound to compliment and share both resources and talent. Our church, for example, has a number of ministries that are not concerned with the partnership that directs our urban outreaches. Many of these ministries are designed to serve the needs of our congregants and to disciple them. Yet, we consistently present the kingdom partnerships that we have to our congregation and we share our assets (buildings, volunteer personnel, etc.) with our partners whenever possible. This open relationship created in the heart by the Holy Spirit, expands the vision and opportunity for our congregants allowing them to see the Body of Christ and Kingdom of God on a much larger scale. As a result, a number of people from outside of the urban center have been attracted to our church desiring to participate in a ministry that has not committed itself to exclusivity.

It must be noted here that in order for this to work, the Holy Spirit must create the relationships (Col 2.2; Eph 4.16). Apart from this we have denominational exclusivity or pluralistic ecumenicalism, which is frustrating to Christ and confusing to the church. The partnership is one of the heart. The participating churches and organizations have to prove themselves to be others-oriented and not merely self-serving. Ideally, this attitude should be displayed by the leadership of the organization or church itself. When found, it is the fertile soil of productive growth for the furtherance of Christ's kingdom (Matt 13.23; Lu 8.15).

CONCLUSION: THE GREAT EXPERIMENT

Today, there are more than 6.8 billion people in the world with over half of this population living in the urban centers. In comparison, in 1900 there was only 8 percent living in urban centers.¹¹ There is a major shift and this shift is not beyond the scope of God's reach or purpose. While many churches flee urban centers for the suburbs, the challenging opportunities of urban ministry are becoming increasingly attractive to others. Abounding in ethnic diversity, it is here that the world can be reached! We combine this phenomenon with the fact that our culture is becoming increasingly illiterate regarding biblical truth. The natural result of this ignorance is that "the people whom churches seek to evangelize are less and less prepared for the gospel message."¹² We are urban missionaries in the truest sense!

These challenges are further complicated by a society that is increasingly suspicious of large corporations that mirror government bureaucracy. This attitude eradicates long established trust for large denominations and evangelistic organizations and moves ministry to a more individualistic level. Individual churches are weighed on the scale of their community impact and need to promote community service while not compromising the clear message of the gospel.

¹¹Kenneth L. Davis, "Developing Strategies for Reaching Cities," *Journal of Ministry and Theology*, Vol. 4 (fall, 2000): 118-119.

¹²Leith Anderson, "The Church at History's Hinge," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Volume 151 (Jan. 1994): 9.

We could compare this mission field to what others have found on foreign mission fields. There, the issue is effectiveness and survival. Secondary ministry dogma becomes increasingly less important when confronted with such obstacles. We are here today in the inner cities of our nation. Partnering in the kingdom may be the only effective means of reaching such a diverse and challenging population. It is a message that, for us, has become a ministry motto and methodology. It gives us great hope and expectation for the future when we see that we can achieve greater things together. As a friend of mine said, “we are better together and downright boring apart.” It might be better stated this way “we are better together and downright ineffective apart.”

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