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As you read through this second volume of *New Urban World*, I would like to invite you to think of each article, response, review, and photo as a thread that is being woven together into a tapestry to help us understand our theme—integral mission. But as you begin reading (and weaving), it may be helpful to have an initial working definition in mind, which can be modified as you add each thread.

Lesslie Newbigin's definition of mission is simply “wanting to be where God is,”¹ and those of us who attended the first ever International Society for Urban Mission summit in Bangkok in January 2013 built on that definition in order to say that integral urban mission is not only wanting to be where God is, but serving like Jesus.² We recognized through many outstanding speakers and through stories and fellowship that the Spirit and the body cannot be divided, and, to do so as has been done in mission models past, is not only unhealthy, but unbiblical (John 1:14). And so we dialogued around these concepts:

- What would new ways of life together look like if we began to dwell together well in order to challenge the powers?
- And what if we not only helped the hungry, but asked, “What is causing the hunger?” Or, helped the victims of abuse and asked, “What is causing the abuse?”
- What if we realized we were on a journey together with the urban poor and brought our brokenness to light as we worked out ways to share, because, as we were reminded, we cannot share what we do not have?

² Or, if you prefer, The Micah Network has a great definition of integral mission: “Integral mission or holistic transformation is the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ.” See www.micahnetwork.org.
Through a variety of voices, including some of whom are heard again here in this edition of *New Urban World*—Rosalee Ewell, Shane Claiborne—we were challenged to do small acts with great love, to find joy in the miracle of the mundane, learning God’s heart for and response to injustice, and learning how to heal from being fragmented people doing fragmented work that has been falsely dichotomized and prioritized in categories of “spiritual or physical or social.” These are categories Jesus never used and so we were challenged to really learn to model and participate in the shalom of the kingdom.

As a beautiful symbol of the work before us, this excellent summit closed with over 200 urban workers from every continent taking communion together and receiving the sign of the cross in oil on our hands so that we would remember that these hands are Christ’s hands working in the cities. As I watched everyone disperse, I was reminded of something Teresa of Avila wrote,

*Christ has no body but yours,*

*No hands, no feet on earth but yours,*

*Yours are the eyes with which he looks*  

*Compassion on this world,*

*Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,*

*Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.*

May you be encouraged as we were by this very special edition of *New Urban World* to embark on a mission to serve like Jesus. Integral Mission.

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**Dr. Kendi Howells Douglas** is the Professor of Cross Cultural Ministries at Great Lakes Christian College in Lansing, Michigan, and has served on various mission fields including: Santiago, Dominican Republic; Tokyo, Japan; Yucatan, Mexico; Detroit, Michigan; and Nairobi, Kenya. She is also an author, focusing on urban ministry, including chapters in *River of God: An Introduction to World Mission*. Kendi is co-author of the forthcoming book *Love God–Love People: A Corinthian Approach to Urban Ministry* and is also co-editor of the urban book series Urban Ministry in the Twenty-first Century.
See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not 
labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon 
in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. 

Matthew 6:28–29

**TONY CAMPOLO:** Most Red Letter Christians are waking up to the importance of rescuing the environment. We talk a lot about how we’re polluting the oceans and the air we breathe, and about the fact that global warming is being caused by carbon dioxide collecting in the upper levels of the atmosphere because of our use of fossil fuels. Not much is being said about environmentalism being a pro-life issue, but the two are related.

**SHANE CLAIBORNE:** Yeah, this really is another pro-life issue. I heard a lot of theology growing up that was about how this world is not our home, so how we live in it doesn’t really matter. I’ve come to see the terrible repercussions of that theology. I love some of the old songs like “I’ll Fly Away,” but there is a danger if our sense that “this world is not my home” affects how we respect the earth and how we leave it for our kids.

When we disregard the creation, it must sadden the Creator who made it all and happily pronounced it “good” (Gen 1:31).

Creation care has everything to do with loving our neighbor. Poor folks carry the heaviest burden, as we can see in my neighborhood or in places like Camden, New Jersey, that have been devastated by what we call environmental racism. By this we

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mean that some of our poorer neighborhoods have more superfund sites (which get their names from the fact that they are so polluted it would take “superfunds” to clean them up). In fact, they have more of these sites in them than some states have in their entire state. These are not natural catastrophes; they’re human made. That’s what happens when you take sewage from our biggest cities and dump it into a few miles of geography. You can literally smell the pollution in the air in Camden. The waterfront, which is why folks moved there decades ago, is so polluted there are signs that say “Don’t Fish, Don’t Swim, Do Not Enter”—the very stuff you are supposed to do in water.

And it is not just the cities. Take for instance areas like Columbia, Mississippi, where 55-gallon drums of toxic waste were buried in the ground of their community. They began to leak so much that you could light the dirt on fire.

People talk about how they feel close to God in nature, and we see how Jesus went up to the mountains to pray and how God met people in the wilderness. The flip side is also true: When we lose touch with creation, we can lose touch with God. When everything we look at is ugly, it’s hard to believe there is a beautiful Creator. So part of our mission at The Simple Way is what farmer and theologian Wendell Berry calls “practicing resurrection.”

One of the most beautiful things we get to do here at The Simple Way is plant gardens in the concrete jungle of North Philadelphia—and see kids discover the miracle of life and fall in love with the Creator of life. Gardens have a special place in the human story. After all, God first planted humanity in a garden in Eden, the most redemptive act in history began in a garden in Gethsemane, and the story ends in Revelation with the image of the garden taking over the City of God, with the river of life flowing through the city center and the tree of life piercing the urban concrete.

Now, as we approach fifteen years of community at the Simple Way, we have half a dozen lots that we are gardening on. And we are seeing a neighborhood come back to life. We see kids discover the miracle of life. We plant all sorts of community gardens and are starting to do some urban farming.
Kids get so excited when they see tomatoes grow for the first time. When we harvest the first cucumber of the season, the kids cut it into slices and hand it out like communion. Hunting potatoes is like digging for treasure. I will never forget when one of the kids picked a carrot out of the ground for the first time. With wide eyes and an ear-to-ear smile, he lifted it out of the dirt and said, “It’s magic!” And we get to say, “It’s not magic. It’s God. And the God who made that carrot made you, and loves you.” The more they see things that are alive, the more filled with wonder they become at the God who made all this wild and wonderful stuff like fireflies and butterflies, hummingbirds, and earthworms—and you and me.

When you look at concrete, buildings, trash, tires, all the stuff of humans, sometimes you can wonder if there is a God. When you see nature, life, beauty, you can’t help but know there is a God.

One of the other dimensions of this, especially when it comes to gardening and healthy food, is what many folks like Michelle Obama have started calling the “food deserts.”

Studies have shown that there is a disturbing correlation between the density of populations and the number of healthy food stores. What studies found over and over is the complete opposite of what you’d expect and hope: the areas with the highest populations of people have the fewest healthy food stores and the areas with the fewest people have the highest number of healthy food stores.

There is an epidemic of obesity, diabetes, hyperactivity, and malnutrition in poor neighborhoods. Kids drink soda and eat junk food and TV dinners because they can’t get to good food or because healthy food can’t compete economically with McDonald’s. I will never forget the haunting words of a neighborhood kid who once said years ago, “It’s easier to get a gun in our neighborhood than it is to get a salad.” His words broke my heart. And they have continued to fan a flame all these years to try to change that reality.

As Christians, we’ve got to look at the environmental issue for so many reasons. Jesus sure talks about a God who cares about the lilies and the sparrows, so God must
care about the polar bears and penguins as their ice melts. And we should care all the more because issues of the environment and nutrition and pollution affect people. And we know God’s crazy about people.

Stephen Bouma-Prediger, in his book *For the Beauty of the Earth*, dissects some of the bad theology that has led to Christians abusing the planet. One of the things he looks at are the images of the earth being consumed by fire, which appear in places like Peter’s epistle (2 Pet 3:10). These verses often say the world will be “destroyed” by fire. But Stephen points out that these words and images are used in Scripture as a “refiner’s fire,” one that restores life. How we think theologically can make a big difference in how we live. Whether we think God’s end plan is to restore creation or to burn everything up affects how we walk on the earth.

**TONY CAMPOLO:** Paul, in 1 Corinthians, wrote about “fire” that would burn away hay, wood, and stubble, leaving only gold, silver, and precious stones (3:12–13).

A real problem with the evangelical community is that it has allowed the New Age movement to kidnap the environmentalist movement. The minute we start talking about the environment, some of our evangelical brothers and sisters label us “New Agers.” The truth is that being concerned about the environment is a biblical mandate and should be our concern as Red Letter Christians.

**SHANE CLAIBORNE:** And creation is simply amazing! This past year we had fireflies in our neighborhood. I hadn’t seen one of those in the past twelve years I’ve lived here. The kids were so amazed they ran in circles. “Why does it glow?” one of them asked. I said, “I think God was just feeling really creative that day—’Hey how about a bug whose butt glows in the dark?’”

**TONY CAMPOLO:** Nature, in all its splendor, exists for the glory of God (Ps 19:1). The Bible says that the stars, the planets, and the galaxies were all created to worship God; and the psalmist calls upon the “leviathans of the deep” (the whales) to sing their songs of praise to God (Ps 148).

When people sing the words of the Doxology, “Praise God from whom all blessings flow, Praise him *all creatures* here below,” I wonder if they ever think about the words.
There is more to nature than can be discerned through empirical and non-mystical observations. There is something very spiritual about nature.

In the book of Romans, the sons and daughters of God are called upon to rescue nature: “All of nature groans and is in travail waiting for the sons and the daughters of God to come and rescue it from its suffering” (Rom 8:21–22, paraphrased).

SHANE CLAIBORNE: Shortly after the verses about creation groaning comes Romans 12:2, which says, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” We are to have a new imagination. The prophets invite us to imagine a world where we beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks (Isa 2:4). We turn the tools of death into tools of life. I recently learned to weld from a buddy of mine. We literally took an AK-47, dismantled it, and then turned the barrel of it into a shovel and the gun itself into a pitchfork. Now we just need to learn how to turn a tank into a tractor.

But we really need that imagination when it comes to the environment. The current patterns are terribly unsustainable. In the United States, five percent of the world’s population is consuming nearly half of the world’s resources. If the whole world were to pursue the American dream, we’d need four more planets. The world can’t afford the American dream. The good news is that God has another dream, and he is inviting us to be a part of bringing it to pass.

Corporations have been wickedly shrewd in devising ways to get us to buy stuff we don’t need. There are engineers who use their imaginations for the opposite of life—to engineer seeds so the plants they grow don’t reproduce, making it necessary for folks to buy new ones every year. We’ve seen imaginations used for death and for destruction in things like the atomic bomb and the capacity to drill holes underwater for oil.

I am excited to be alive today. I see imaginations being used for life, for redemption, for the kingdom of God. A group of engineers has designed merry-go-rounds that pump water as kids play on them. So they create a playground for kids in Africa while pumping water for the village.

I visited a college that had created an eco-village. The toilets flushed using dirty sink
water. The laundry machines were powered by stationary bikes. We’ve got a group of elderly folks who rescue plastic shopping bags from the trash and crochet them into mats that we give homeless people to sleep on for padding. Another group of folks in retirement take scrap materials and make sleeping bags for people on the street, which they deliver to us by the truckload. And they use neckties for the shoulder strap to make it easy to carry. Gotta find a use for neckties these days. Imagination.

One really neat project in Philly is a “Greasel Station,” where a recovery community makes biodiesel out of waste veggie oil they gather up. It’s all being done by folks recovering from drug and alcohol addictions, many of whom have been unemployed. In our neighborhood, drugs are one of the biggest industries, and they wanted to change that. Now they have this biodiesel station. The philosophy behind their business is about how the things we discard still have value. Some of the people have even been treated as waste. So when they take waste veggie oil and make it fuel cars, they are driven by a theology of resurrection. Dead things can be brought back to life.

Another urban farm called Growing Power, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, was started by those in the neighborhood who insisted that nutritious food shouldn’t be a privilege available only to those who can afford it. They now have vertical farms that feed two thousand families off two acres of land. And in Brazil, my friend Claudio has chickens, rabbits, and goats on a little urban lot. He even makes soap out of veggie oil waste and creates soil out of McDonald’s coffee waste.

Detroit, Michigan, is experimenting with some similar urban farms on the thousands of vacant lots that belonged to factories that used to provide jobs. Vacant lots are being reclaimed as farmland. Our latest experiment in resurrection has been a new greenhouse, which we completed this past week. We built it on the fire-scorched land where our houses burned down almost exactly five years ago. Now our park flaunts a solar-powered greenhouse with an 1800-gallon fish pond that can hold more than a thousand fish that will fertilize the water where plants grow on raised beds above the tank. This aquaponics project is an integrated system of fish-farming and hydroponics that mimics what nature does naturally. Building on some of the most creative
techniques in urban farming, we are now cultivating life in these postindustrial ruins, where we see the dark side of the global economy every day. Each morning we wake up on the wrong side of capitalism. But we see hope. We are building a new world in the shell of the old one. We see grass piercing concrete. We see a neighborhood coming back to life, rising from the dead. We now have a little oasis in the “food desert” of North Philadelphia. And we’ll have fish tacos for everybody!

It reminds me of the new Jerusalem we see in the book of Revelation, where God’s holy city is a garden city, an urban garden gone wild. The best of the garden and the best of our cities meet. That’s our vision of what the restoration of things will look like.

**TONY CAMPOLO:** When the prophet Isaiah says that the lion and the lamb will lie down together (Isa 11:6), he means that nature will once again have peaceable harmony restored. I believe that when sin entered the world, as described in Genesis, it not only affected human beings but all of nature. We live in the context of what theologians call “a fallen creation.” I believe that’s why there is so much violence in the animal kingdom. Isaiah goes on to say, “They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (11:9, KJV). That’s a good line. It’s telling us that when God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven, earth shall be delivered from all the damage we’ve done to it. Harmony will again be restored to God’s creation.

Jesus said that this peaceable kingdom is already breaking loose in our midst. He said, “The kingdom of God is among you” (Luke 17:21, ISV). I see signs of that kingdom here and now, and I believe that his kingdom is increasing before our eyes. To be a kingdom people is to join God in what he’s doing, and to participate with God in rescuing nature from the mess we’ve made of it.

**SHANE CLAIBORNE:** The transformation does not begin with kings and presidents. It begins with people. Isaiah 2:4 says, “[My people] will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.” It begins with the people of God who start turning the things of death into things of life. And the
kings and presidents and nations will follow.

**TONY CAMPOLO:** In the minds of skeptics, small, incremental efforts such as gardening hardly do anything to change the world and make for global harmony. But Jesus said the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. Mustard seeds are small, insignificant things in the eyes of most of us. They are so small that we hardly notice them; but Jesus said that they grow and grow until they become large enough for the birds of the air to make their nests in them (Mark 4:31–32). Jesus makes it clear that it is from such little things that great results come.

**SHANE CLAIBORNE:** Most of the images Jesus offers for the kingdom of God are small and subtle. Seeds. Light. Yeast. Things you can’t even see but they spread like crazy. And I love the mustard seed metaphor for the kingdom. Mustard grew like a wild and invasive weed. Jews had laws against growing mustard in their gardens, because it would take over the whole garden, leaving them only with mustard.

Mustard is a humble plant though. It didn’t grow huge like the cedars of Lebanon or the giant redwoods in California. Mature mustard only stands eight to ten feet high, a modest little bush. What a beautiful garden image of how the kingdom of God takes over the world—a small, subtle, humble invasion of goodness and grace.

**TONY CAMPOLO:** In small projects and programs we see potential for important changes. However, as important as the small things are, we still have to deal with the big picture and address environmental concerns on the macro level.

Not too long ago I traveled to Buenos Aires for a speaking engagement. I flew there during the night, and as my plane flew over Brazil, I was 35,000 feet high. To my surprise, as far as my eyes could see, I saw fires burning all over the Amazon. People were burning down the rainforest for two reasons. One was to make it easier to dig out the minerals buried in the ground. Just as important, however, was to remove trees to create more grazing land for cattle. The earth has become a beef-eating world, and more and more land is needed to raise the cattle to supply that beef.

This raises questions about how much red meat we are consuming. Are our dietary habits related to the destruction of the planet? Most scientists would say that
Americans are eating too much and that what we are eating is the wrong food. We're eating ourselves to death while so many in the world are at death's door because of a lack of protein in their diets. Scientists point out that if the grains that produce protein were eaten by people directly rather than being eaten by the cattle, which we then eat, the amount of protein available for the poor people of the world would increase by 90 percent.

Everything is linked together, and when we mess with one part of God's creation, the ramifications reverberate all through the planet, having an impact on people around the world.

**SHANE CLAIBORNE:** Even small changes mean sacrifice. To have any integrity as an abolitionist in Europe in the 1800s meant that you didn't have sugar in your tea because the sugar industry was built on the backs of slaves. In the same way, we must ask ourselves, what is the cost of our way of life? Whose pain sustains our lifestyle? We may need to give up some things. It may be meat, oil, or chocolate. We may not want to patronize any company we are not proud of. We may want to grow our own food or run our cars on waste veggie oil. We get to live with a new imagination and not conform to the patterns of death.

Some of the most joyful and alive people I know live close to the earth, spend time in nature. Jesus certainly did and invites us to do the same. In fact, the culture of the early Christians probably more closely resembled the Bedouins we met over in the Holy Land than the 'burbs. Christians born in indigenous cultures around the world connect their faith to the care for creation, and they have so much to teach us.

There are good questions we should raise about progress: How much happier people are we? We are busier, but are we more alive? Studies keep showing that the richest corners of the earth have some of the highest rates of loneliness, depression, and suicide. With all our technologies and virtual stuff, studies keep showing that the more virtual friends we have, the lonelier people we become. Maybe it's time to look back at the garden. I'm not saying we should all wear fig leaves, but perhaps we can move a little closer to what God had in mind for this world.
The early Christians said that the cross puts the whole world back together. The vertical dimension of the cross is about reconciling people to God. The horizontal dimension of the cross is about reconciling people to one another. And the fact that the cross is anchored in the ground reminds us that God is restoring all of creation.

Shane Claiborne graduated from Eastern University, and did graduate work at Princeton Seminary. His ministry experience is varied, from a 10-week stint working alongside Mother Teresa in Calcutta, to a year spent serving a wealthy mega-congregation at Willow Creek Community Church outside Chicago. During the recent war in Iraq, Shane spent three weeks in Baghdad with the Iraq Peace Team. Shane is also a founding partner of The Simple Way, a faith community in inner city Philadelphia that has helped to birth and connect radical faith communities around the world.

Dr. Tony Campolo is professor emeritus of sociology at Eastern University, a former faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania, and the founder and president of the Evangelical Association for the Promotion of Education. He has written more than 35 books, blogs regularly at his website, redletterchristians.org, and can also be found on both Facebook and Twitter. Dr. Campolo and his wife Peggy live near Philadelphia and have two children and four grandchildren.
If Claiborne and Campolo represented the Christian faith of their two generations, these generations would be incredibly well served. Too many have either ignored God’s concerns for the earth, theologically justifying the dismissal of the physical world or they have worshipped the material, as if the physical is all that matters. These two statesmen of Red Letter Christianity find ways to reject their own generation’s blind spots and discuss hopeful visions of Jesus’ idea of redemption for the whole cosmos in accessible, practical, and often amusing ways.

I found it a privilege to overhear Claiborne and Campolo’s stimulating, passionate, and inspiring conversations about taking Jesus seriously in relationship with creation. Framing environmental concerns as a pro-life, eschatological mandate for disciples of Jesus, the two explored the practical repercussions of God’s concern for creation healed.

Too often secular environmental movements have demonized the city, unable to see its creative potential. Shane’s anecdotes about urban gardens as the signs of hope, therefore, are an especially important antidote to the view of city as inherently cursed. I have visited North Philly and seen these gardens spotted throughout the neighbourhood myself and couldn’t help but ask, how could something similar become a sign of hope in our slum in Klong Toey? The joy and witness these gardens can bring have real potential to be signs of the kingdom coming. As Jean Vanier says, “We are not called to be a solution, but a sign.” These mustard-seed-sized projects may at first sight seem small responses to emerging global environmental disasters, but they have real potential to help see urban neighbourhoods become healthier places, building momentum for real change.

There are real warnings and challenges here too for all urban Christians who want to engage our new urban world. That there is a correlation between density of population
and the number of healthy foods stores helps create “an epidemic of obesity, diabetes, hyperactivity, and malnutrition in poor neighborhoods” and, as one of Shane’s neighbourhood children, said “It’s easier to get a gun in our neighborhood than it is to get a salad” is a real cause for concern. Affordable access to healthy food then, as much an issue in Klong Toey as it is in North Philly with a bottle of milk five times more expensive than a bottle of Coke and few cheap, healthy food choices. Healthy food options then, become an important part of God’s kingdom coming in poor urban neighbourhoods because it can help fuel healthy responses.

Economic development as a dominant paradigm for mission is also warned. Helping build the capacity of people to consume more in pursuit of an American style economic dream is not sustainable or the same as Jesus’ mission to see the salvation for the earth. As Shane notes,

_In the United States, five percent of the world’s population is consuming nearly half of the world’s resources. If the whole world were to pursue the American dream, we’d need four more planets. The world can’t afford the American dream. The good news is that God has another dream, and he is inviting us to be a part of bringing it to pass._

To simplify and find more sustainable lifestyles can’t be ignored as part of discipleship. This mixture of hope, challenge, and practical ways forward makes this article (and the book as a whole)¹ an accessible and important discussion starter for any urban Christian community or mission to consider our relationship to God’s cosmos.

**Dr. Ash Barker** is the founding director of Urban Neighbours of Hope, which began in Springvale (Melbourne, Australia) in 1993 and now has chapters of workers loving God and neighbours in some of the neediest urban neighbourhoods in Melbourne, Sydney, and Bangkok. He is the author of several books, including _Slum Life Rising._

¹ See Kendi Howells Douglas’s review in this edition of _NUW._
The astonishing growth of cities all over the world is a contemporary fact that does not need to be proved. Megacities, especially in the Majority World, are multiplying at an amazing rate, quite often without an adequate infrastructure to satisfy the basic human needs of the growing population, such as clean water, food, housing, healthcare, education, and work. According to experts on this subject, most of the world population a century ago lived in rural areas, while at present more than half live in overcrowded cities. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was no city with more than one million inhabitants; in 1945 there were already 30; in 1955 there were 60; and in 2005 there were 336.

No attempt can here be made to explain the reasons for this phenomenon. There is no doubt, however, that one of the main contributing factors for rural people to feel attracted to the city is their hope that the urban setting will enable them to improve their standard of living. Some of them will make it, but sadly, a large percentage of them will sooner or later find out that their dream has turned into a nightmare. My attempt in this article is, in the first place, to explore the reasons for this disappointing experience of a growing number of city immigrants and, in the second place, to reflect on the challenge that their situation poses to the church and the Christian response to it.

The city as institutionalized apartheid

One of the most memorable conversations I have ever had with peasants was one I had a few years ago in Yalalag, State of Oaxaca, Mexico. Most of them were middle-aged and had children who had migrated first to Mexico City and then to the United States looking for work. The parents were left behind with the idea that they would join their
children as soon as work was secured. When I asked them what was going on, they told me their sad story—no longer could they make a living in the rural area because big agribusiness from the United States were importing into Mexico thousands of tons of corn produced with state subsidy and sold at a much lower price than the price of the corn locally produced. As a result, the peasants were losing their lands, and not only their land, but also the young people who would have inherited it.

The dumping of subsidized corn from the United States into Mexico (a country that lives mainly on corn!) is only one of the many factors that force peasants to leave their homeland and to migrate to the cities where they will most likely become slum dwellers. Another important factor is that technology has displaced thousands of workers from the fields by making them redundant in regards to sowing and harvesting. A small percentage of the peasants migrating to the cities may be able to find a regular job as employees or become agents of an informal economy outside the slum. Many of them, however, in order to survive, will see no other option than to set their eyes on migrating to the United States, or join a gang involved in the trafficking of persons or drugs, in prostitution or delinquency. Conditions in the slums are hardly livable. And yet, out of a population of over 115 million in Mexico, about 60 percent living in the metropolitan areas dwell in slums, while only 30 percent live in middleclass residential areas and the remaining 10 percent are members of the wealthy minority class whose lifestyle fully reflects the consumer society.

Mexico is a paradigm of today’s urban world—a world of institutionalized apartheid with masses of slum dwellers who can barely cover their basic needs, on the one hand, and a small elite minority who enjoy the deceptive benefits that globalization offers to the transnational class, on the other hand.

The challenge of the city, to the church, and the Christian response

If there is one place where the power of the gospel is put to the test today, that place is the city. To be sure, the reality of sin can be perceived everywhere in the world—in the rural areas as well as in the cities; in the deserts like Sahara or Patagonia as
well as in the great metropolises like Buenos Aires, Tokyo, New York, or Bombay. The fact remains, however, that at least in the modern world the city is the most vivid expression of both human inventiveness and idolatry. The urbanization of the world is not merely a question of the demographic expansion of cities all over the world. It is also a question of a mindset that dominates the modern world and that may be described as the “consumer mentality”—the mindset of the consumer society marked by the predominant role given to money, sex, and power.

The mass media is used to condition people to a lifestyle in which they work to (1) make money, (2) make money to buy things, and (3) buy things to find value for themselves.

The powerful industry of advertising is controlled by people whose interests are aligned with a constant increase in production, and production in turn depends upon a level of consumption made possible only in a society that believes that to live is to possess. All of life is therefore organized as a function of production and consumption. The city gradually presses people into a materialistic mold, a mold that gives absolute value to things as status symbols and leaves no time for them to reflect on questions regarding the importance of interpersonal relationships, the meaning of work, or the purpose of life. Sad to say, the consumer mentality is not restricted to people who have the financial resources to constantly update the gadgets that industry offers them, but all too often it blindfolds the eyes of the poor to such an extent that they may get into debt to buy a television set instead of using their scarce resources to provide proper nourishment to their children.

The consumer society is the shape that the world dominated by the powers of destruction has taken today. This is the world hostile to God and enslaved to the powers of darkness. Nowhere else than in the city under the dominion of consumerism can one see so clearly that “the whole world is under the control of the evil one” (1 John 5:19).

If the power of the gospel is to be manifest in the city today, it has to be proclaimed by a church that does not only speak about but also lives out God’s love in Jesus Christ. A
large number of Christians have totally misunderstood the gospel. They have assumed that all that God requires from them is that they leave time in their busy schedule to give their dues to him and to secure for themselves inner peace in the present and life beyond death in the future. Much of the practice of Christianity that we see around us is a Christianity that has been accommodated to the consumer society. In a market of “free consumers” of religion, in which the church has no possibility of holding a monopoly on religion, this Christianity has resorted to making it attractive by reducing its message to a minimum in order to make people want to become Christians. The gospel thus becomes a type of merchandise, the acquisition of which guarantees to the consumer the highest values—success in life and personal happiness now and forever. The cross has lost its offense: it simply points to Jesus Christ’s death as a sacrifice for our sin but it does not present his call to whole-life discipleship. This kind of gospel has nothing to say to people imprisoned by the consumer society and even less to people who suffer the injustices of an economic system characterized by institutionalized apartheid that keeps the well-to-do people separated from the poor.

Churches with this kind of gospel need not take the inner city and the slums seriously—they may as well take flight into the middle- and high-class suburbs, where they can cater to private religious needs of their members. In a world that is increasingly urbanized, we Christians cannot avoid asking ourselves what it is that God demands from us as urban followers of Jesus Christ, who cried over the city of Jerusalem. We all must seriously consider the possibility that God may be calling us to serve him in the inner city or even in a slum. We cannot take for granted that we can simply be satisfied with giving the Lord a few hours a week and one-tenth of our salary and then feel free to choose the location for our home and our job according to our own convenience. The greatest challenge that the city poses to the church of Jesus Christ today is the challenge to live out the gospel of the kingdom of life, peace, and justice as a witness to people who are living in a situation of injustice, poverty, and oppression. And there is no proper response to that challenge apart from Christians who are willing to take up their cross and follow Jesus Christ by identifying themselves with the victims of the
institutionalized apartheid that prevails in the cities.

According to the Gospels, when Jesus called prospective disciples like Peter, James, and John to follow him, he did not call them to a life of ease and economic security. On the contrary, in unmistakable terms he laid down the conditions for the kind of discipleship he expected from his followers: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple... none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions” (Luke 14:26-27, 33). By no means does Jesus’ call imply that God expects every Christian today to literally give up all his or her possessions and live among the poor. According to New Testament teaching, there is room in the Christian community for “those who in the present age are rich,” who are called “not to be haughty, or to set their hope on the uncertainties of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, they are to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they take hold of the life that really is life” (1 Tim 6:17-19).

There are, however, at least two reasons why no person who takes Christian discipleship seriously should simply assume that he or she is exempt from Jesus’ call to renounce all earthly possessions in a literal way for the sake of the gospel. The first reason is that Christians are people who know “the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, who though he was rich, yet for [their] sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty [they] might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9). Jesus’ generous act sets the pattern for the communication of the gospel throughout the history of the church and in today’s world, deeply affected by poverty. The second reason is that the most effective way to communicate the gospel to the poor is the incarnational way—integral mission, which

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1 The hyperbolic use of hate here is a Semitic way of forcefully expressing that the love for Jesus he expects from his followers is far superior to the family love that was commonly expected in contemporary Jewish society.
includes living it, acting it, and saying it.

The last few decades provide wonderful illustrations of the Christian response to the challenge that the city poses to the church in an urban setting. Let me give you three outstanding examples.

**Viv Grigg**

One cannot deal with this subject without recognizing the decisive influence that Viv Grigg from New Zealand and Servants Among the Poor have had in the formation of the Urban Leadership Foundation, a global network of missions and religious orders—the Encarnação Alliance—focused on the urban poor. By living in the slums of Manila, he found a new understanding of Jesus’ basic motivation and passion for knowing God, and that understanding led him to write the first draft of *The Lifestyle and Values*, which defines the core values of the missions in the network, whose *first and central purpose* is following Christ in terms of sacrifice and service in the slums of the great cities of the world. This involves the closest possible identification with the poor in their lifestyle, language, and culture through non-destitute poverty, recognizing the need of housing, food, clothing, tools, and so on, but with an attitude of freedom from possessions and willingness to share what one owns with others; inner simplicity expressed in a simple lifestyle based on the renunciation of earthly possessions.

God did not allow Grigg to stay in the slums of Manila, however. God had “a broader vision” than his, and that vision included the writing of *Companion to the Poor* with the purpose of articulating an evangelical theology on living and working incarnationally among the poor and mobilizing the church in New Zealand for that purpose. The result was the formation of *Servants to Asia’s Urban Poor*.

After the first purpose of following Christ came the *second purpose: knowing Christ through loving the poor*, according to the Franciscan perspective, and recognizing that

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1 On Viv Grigg’s pilgrimage, see *Cry of the Urban Poor* (Georgia, USA: Authentic Media in partnership with World Vision, 2005).


3 Viv Grigg, *Companion to the Poor* (Monrovia, California: MARC, 1990). The first edition of this book was published in 1984 in Australia by Albatross Books and in Britain by Lion Publishing. The Spanish translation was published in 1994 in Buenos Aires by Nueva Creación under the title *Siervos entre los pobres*. 


righteousness implies social justice, according to the Old Testament perspective. The result was lifestyle commitments and spiritual disciplines for the sake of knowing Christ, such as the following: obedience and devotion; simplicity of possessions and renunciation of wealth (Lk 14:33); incarnation and service among the poor of the slums (Matt 25:34–40); preaching the gospel to the poor (Luke 4:18); seeking justice for the poor (Jer 22:16); and commitment to community.

The third purpose was establishing multiplying indigenous fellowships with shared emphases: evangelism and disciple-making; service to the urban poor; the power of the Holy Spirit; and peacemaking, justice, and development.

Grigg claims that God kept speaking to him through visions, moving him to walk through other cities and to intercede for them. God’s call was changed from reaching the poor to transforming the cities, including not only the poor but also those causing their poverty. He began walking the streets of other cities and decided to write Cry of the Urban Poor. He now saw Jesus as loving the whole world and dedicated himself to developing a broader mission, beyond New Zealand, through the formation of teams that follow The Lifestyle and Values and practice participatory decision-making and fellowship of commitment. Recognizing that there are people who love the poor but for some reason are not able to live among the poor, he accepted the Franciscan model of a dual-level missionary order and structured Servants Among the Poor as a religious order with vows of non-destitute poverty that would send North Americans.

The aim for each country is to walk with Jesus and speak his Word and eventually, as the Word produces life, to form a board and appoint a leader. The setting up of new missions, however, is not sufficient. The effort is therefore made to encourage mission leaders to organize alternative orders within their missions for the work among the poor. Several missions have accepted the challenge. According to Grigg, however, the main focus for accomplishing the missionary task among the poor must not be on Western missions but on Majority World missions serving as the catalysts of indigenous ministries. Urban Leadership Foundation is therefore committed to
building and mobilizing networks among existing missions and churches for the sake of the witness to the gospel among the poor.

**John Perkins**

Another example of integral mission among the poor is the ministry of Black American John Perkins, which he started with his wife Vera Mae as early as 1960 with *The Voice of Calvary* in Mendenhall, Mississippi, and has extended to many places, especially in the United States, through the John M. Perkins Foundation and the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA, formed in 1989). At a time when the large majority of Evangelical Christians assumed that the mission of the church could be defined exclusively in terms of evangelism as the oral communication of the gospel and the planting of churches, John's ground breaking writings were of great encouragement and inspiration to Christians (including me) who were looking for a more holistic and biblical view of the Christian mission. He synthesizes his missionary strategy for the church to respond to urban poverty in three words, “the three Rs,” as he calls them: relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution.

**Relocation:** Faithfulness to the gospel implies the same kind of special concern for the poor that characterized Jesus Christ’s ministry. He is our model, and his followers are called to reproduce his incarnation by identifying themselves with the weak, the afflicted, the oppressed. Only by doing that—from within the situation of the poor—will they be able to feel the needs of the poor, understand the true causes of poverty, and find ways to help.

**Reconciliation:** Poverty is oftentimes closely related to racism and ethnocentrism. As a Black man he suffered mistreatment and violence on the part of White people, including the police. That is the price that Black people have to pay to live in a southern state of the United States. As a human being, he was inclined

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4 On John Perkins's background as a boy who grew up in utter poverty, and his own story of how he initiated and, under God, was able to develop *The Voice of Calvary*, see *With Justice for All* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1982). This book provides the author's strategy to implement his missiology previously presented in *Let Justice Roll Down* (Ventura, California: Regal Books, new ed., 2006). Translated into Spanish and published in Buenos Aires by Nueva Creación in 1988, *Justicia para todos* has been very useful in planting the seed of integral mission all over Latin America.
to respond to hate with hate, but God dealt with him and he understood that the Whites are victims of their own racism and that both Black and White need to be liberated from racial hatred through the gospel of reconciliation. The gospel of reconciliation became an integral part of *The Voice of Calvary*.

**Redistribution:** There is plenty of food in the world for every person to be properly fed, and yet there are hundreds of millions of hungry people around the world. The root problem is not lack of food but inequity in the distribution of it. This lack of equity affects not only the distribution of food but all aspects of social life. What is urgently needed, therefore, is a redistribution of resources based on the recognition on the part of the rich that what they have does not belong to them—that they are called to be stewards responsible before God, who is a God of justice, to share their resources, not just their goods but also their knowledge, skills, and technology with the poor. Furthermore, they need to recognize that the poor are imprisoned by the oppressive economic system that originally caused their poverty, and that the way to break the oppression is by creating free enterprises organized as cooperatives, not for the enrichment of a few but for the common good.

**Christian and Christine Schneider**

A much more recent example of the Christian response to the challenge posed by the city is the ministry that Christian Schneider, a primary school teacher from Basel, Switzerland, started in the slums of Manila in 1988, a few years before he married Christine, a nurse, also from Basel.² An outstanding feature of their account of their ministry is the openness with which they describe to their reactions to what they see or experience. To illustrate this point, here is a quotable snapshot:

> The North American missionary group was an impressive discovery. Most of the 40 foreign colleagues lived in complete American luxury in the heavily guarded areas of the city. The work in the streets, in the prisons, and the nursing homes was performed by 160 Filipinos.... The Filipino helpers were poverty stricken

although educated, which one could recognize by their English language skills. They took me with them in their visits to the prisons, to the youthful gangs and street children, and to the red-light districts, where they ran a tea room at night. What I experienced there shocked me to my depths. Need existed in Basel and London too, but Manila was in a different league. Children and entire families literally lived in the streets, in the dirt. For the first time I encountered people who were forced to suffer real hunger and humiliation, who were ignored by society, or who were maltreated as underpaid workers and were forced to fight for their right to life on a daily basis. I saw child labor, beggars, and prostitution. Earlier, I seemed to have suppressed that there were people who actually physically suffered from hunger. That didn’t fit in my theology. This encounter with the poor almost cost me my belief in a merciful God.6

During their time living with the poor, the Schneiders make themselves available to fill the gap whenever and wherever a gap appears and they are able to fill it, be it by building a therapeutic community for the rehabilitation of drug addicts, or for street children, or for prostitutes. By doing so they show that God is love and that he has a special concern for the poor.

One of the values of the Schneiders’ presentation is its emphasis on the personal relationships that they maintain with a wide variety of poor people that they know by name and that they learn to love and respect. Not all the people that they try to help are able to break away from the vicious circle of poverty that they find themselves in, oftentimes without having anyone else to blame other than themselves. By the time the Schneiders return to their home country after over nine years in Manila, however, they can rejoice that the seeds they planted continue to bear fruit. Back in Switzerland, they continue to support Onésimo, the service organization that they formed and that is now under local leadership.

Conclusion

The brief review of ministries that are responding from a Christian perspective to the dehumanizing challenge that the city posed to the church shows the importance of taking as a starting point a full recognition of God’s special concern for the poor,

6 Ibid., 16.
in the first place, and of allowing that recognition to be expressed in terms of a lifestyle that reflects the same concern, in the second place. For the sake of authenticity in a large urban world where hundreds of millions of people are unable to cover their basic human needs, the Christian witness cannot and must not be reduced to words—it has to be incarnational, in line with God’s justice and compassion. It has to be integral mission.

**Dr. René Padilla** was born in Quito, Ecuador, and grew up in Bogotá, Colombia. Since 1967 he has been living in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He is currently the President of the Micah Network.
I believe that René Padilla’s article, “Global Urbanization and Integral Mission,” was right on. Global urbanization is a trend that can be seen everywhere in the world. The reality is that many urban dwellers are somehow “forced” to move to the urban concentrations because their labor in rural areas is not able to provide for them and their families anymore. They see the cities as places where they will find the solution for all of their problems. I have lived in large metropolitan areas (São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) long enough to know that many people moving from the rural to the urban areas do find the employment and the answer to their needs they are looking for. However, not all of them are able to find employment and supply their necessities. Many, if not most of them, do fall into a pattern of poverty and need.

Padilla is very clear on what he believes to be the church’s mission in today’s globalized world: “If the power of the gospel is to be manifest in the city today, it has to be proclaimed by a church that does not only speak about but also lives out God’s love in Jesus Christ.” He even goes one step further when he writes that, “A large number of Christians have totally misunderstood the gospel. They have assumed that all that God requires from them is that they leave time in their busy schedule to give their dues to him and to secure for themselves inner peace in the present and life beyond death in the future.” I appreciate the three examples that Padilla offers on how to have a ministry that has an effective impact on the lives of the poor and the needy (Viv Grigg, John Perkins, and Christian and Christine Schneider). The powerful examples show us that not all is lost; there are still some people who do understand what Christianity is all about when people are faced with poverty.

Coming from a Majority World country (Brazil) has allowed me to see firsthand the consequences of this global urbanization in the lives of my country people. I have many times had the opportunity to minister to people who live in “favelas” (urban slums).
have also been to many other countries where I was again confronted with this reality, especially in the Philippines, India, Guinea Bissau, and Mozambique, among others.

I look at Jesus Christ’s life and what do I see? I see God incarnated and caring about the suffering and needy people around him. His first disciples were fishermen. He blessed the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those persecuted because of righteousness. He touched a man with leprosy. He welcomed the demon-possessed. He called a paralytic “son.” He called the woman who had been bleeding for 12 years “daughter.” He called Matthew the tax collector to be his disciple. He ate with tax collectors and sinners. He healed a ruler’s daughter. He healed a Canaanite woman’s daughter. He said, “Whoever does the will of my Father is my brother and sister and mother” (Matt 12:50). He defended his disciples when they ate without washing their hands. He said, “Let the little children come to me” (Matt 19:14). On the other hand, Jesus also told a rich man to sell all he had and give it to the poor and the man went away sad. He drove those buying and selling out of the temple. He said, “Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites” (Matt 23:15). He does that seven times in Matthew 23 and he also calls them blind several different ways: blind guides, blind fools, blind men, and blind Pharisee, along with being snakes and a brood of vipers.

Looking at Jesus’ life and teaching, it is pretty clear to me that we Christians have a mission in this global world that produces so much richness and poverty. Our mission is to read Matthew 25:31-46 (the Sheep and the Goats) and do like the righteous did—take care of our needy brothers and sisters. I strongly embrace Padilla’s teaching and recommend that all of us respond to his challenge according to Jesus’ recommendation to those who heard him telling the parable of the Good Samaritan: “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37).

Dr. Cláudio Divino had been a successful minister in Brazil for 15 years before coming to the United States. His last church, in the Rio de Janeiro metropolitan area, grew from 650 to 2,500 in a five-year period. Cláudio has served God in his church as editor of Bible School Lessons Publication (1984-1993) and in various administrative positions in his church. He is currently the academic dean at Crossroads College, Rochester, Minnesota.
What does God have to say about cities? What does God have to say about mission and evangelism? What do we already know about cities and what can we learn from the Bible? What is new for our age? What might be the signs of the reign of God in the city today? What is the word on the street? Where is the Word on the street?

Cities are not new or novel to our times. They have always played a role in God’s mission. Many times they have been very central to that mission and often God has asked very demanding things of his servants in relation to a particular city. Think of Jonah and Nahum—which prophet would you rather be? The prophet from the marginalized and oppressed people who is sent to the centre of the empire, to the seat of power to tell them “repent!” and then to see God save that horrible city—the city of your enemies? Or the prophet who gets to say, “Finally, justice will be done and Nineveh will be destroyed!” In general, when we think of our cities, of the corruption, the violence, the abuse, the poverty, we much prefer to be Nahum and to think of God’s mission as doing away with all this horrible stuff. It is easier to be Nahum than to be Jonah.

Similar stories follow for cities like Babylon or Jerusalem or Rome. Babylon is at once both the object of prayer in Jeremiah and the trope for all that is evil and against God in the book of Revelation.¹ Jerusalem is at once the city of David, the city of the beautiful temple for Israel’s God, and the city for which Jesus cries, the city that turns away its prophets, condemns and kills the messiah. Thus, even a cursory sketch of the Bible suggests at the very least that the Scriptures are ambivalent when it comes to cities.

However, you read the first chapters of Genesis, it seems we did not start off as city people: there was the garden and then a more pastoral society. But as the numbers increased and people started living together in larger groups, we begin to see how close living conditions bring out both the good and the bad—the virtues and the vices are exaggerated and made more evident in cities. It is in cities where we witness God’s care and the goodness of his people towards the vulnerable, the sick, the oppressed; but it is also the place where we see the increase in violence, in the practice of oppression and forcing some to the margins. Close living conditions promote the exaggeration of both virtues and vices—the sociological impact of condensed living has both a sinful and a salvific impact.

While the biblical texts have much to say about life and living, this study will focus on “dwelling”—what it means to live the Good News in the city and the Word on the street. Mission thinkers (and the field of missiology in general) can sometimes get caught up in methods, in analyses and strategies for mission and thus fail to imagine what it means to live and to dwell, we fail to reflect on the Word that dwells on the street. And yet dwelling is an extremely important concept in the Bible and it is a concept that relates directly to God’s mission for his people.

Ivan Illich, a Catholic theologian who died in 2002, argued in a speech to the Royal Institute of British Architects that modern cities have reduced dwelling to housing. To dwell is human, Illich wrote. Wild beasts have nests, cattle have stables, cars have garages. Only humans dwell—“To dwell is an art... Spiders are hard-wired by their genes to weave a web of its own kind... but the human is the only animal who is an artist, and the art of dwelling is part of the art of living—it is the art of loving and dreaming, of suffering and dying. A house is neither a nest nor a garage.”

What if we thought of Christian mission as a recovery of a sense of dwelling? What sort of impact might this have on our cities? How might this help us find the Word on the street?

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3 Ibid., 55-56.
When I ask the question: Where do you live? I am not asking for an address. It is a question that asks for the place where your daily existence gives shape to the world. “Just tell me how you dwell and I will tell you who you are.”4 The problem is that in today’s cities people cannot ask this question anymore—at least not fully. Cities are made for consumers and commuters, whether they commute from fancy skyscrapers to the office, or from the slum to the street. We have reduced dwelling to residence. Again following Illich, for the resident, the art of living is fortified—he needs an apartment and security more than he needs a neighbour. He has no need for dwelling, just as he has no need for the art of suffering because he counts on medical assistance, and, he has probably never thought about the art of dying. Residents—those who live in settlements, look the same from Shanghai to New York, from Lima to London. Everywhere you find the same garage for humans—shelves to store the workforce overnight. There seems to be little difference between many apartment complexes and large scale chicken coops—neither is dwelling, certainly neither are at all close to the biblical image of God dwelling among us, of God becoming flesh, and pitching his tent with us.

Cities are a concentrated place of corrupt power and the church in the city must be very careful in its witness to this power lest she also become corrupted by it. Cities alienate—you can be completely alone with 15 million people around you. This also is not the biblical vision for the city or for the ways in which God calls us to dwell and to witness.

Part of the challenge for us is to recognize that cities make koinonia (biblical fellowship) seem invisible, unreal, or impossible because those who can flourish in the city are the ones with resources. It is harder and harder to find yourself depending on others, to share life with others—not just an apartment block, not just sharing square footage, but genuinely sharing life. Dwelling is about sharing life.

So much of urban mission seems to presume that mission is about servicing what we already have—providing more services within the system—more food for the hungry,
more shelter for the homeless, more Bible studies for the middleclass. I am not arguing against shelters or food or Bible studies. But I am challenging the idea that cities are neutral and that we just need to make the best of it, do the best we can to patch things up and make up for the inequalities. What if cities are like the Titanic? Moving around the deck furniture will not do us much good! What if we see the city more like the tower of Babel? It is not neutral, but is a sign of a proud and self-sufficient people that says, “We will make a name for ourselves” rather than “Come Holy Spirit, dwell with us.” It is important to remember that God judges certain forms of life.

*Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth (Gen 11:4).*

*Out of Haran, God called Abram… so Abram went (Gen 12:1-5).*

The people who tried to build the tower were afraid of being scattered so God confuses them and they are scattered indeed. But, already at the end of Genesis 11 and beginning of chapter 12, we read about God’s calling of one particular man. Amongst the scattering of peoples, God builds a relationship with Abram and his family. It is tumultuous, filled with ups and downs, betrayals and faithfulness. God dwells among his people as a visitor near the oak tree at Mamre, as a tower of fire by night, as bread and water and life. Ultimately, God dwells with us in Jesus. And here we have dwelling in its full sense—in Jesus we are taught the art of living and of dying, of being in relationship, whether in Jerusalem or in provincial Nazareth, or London or Bangkok.

God’s renewal does not necessarily mean, “Let us patch up this mess.” Rather, let us build an ark and start anew. Perhaps the hope is not in redeeming the city as it is, but in finding alternative ways of dwelling, offering new spaces where God’s dwelling is seen and heard and touched and tasted. This might very well look like homeless shelters or Bible studies, but it is more than that as well. It is seeing mission as finding ways to share life with others and to build relationships because this is how God chose to do things with us.
In the first verses of the Gospel of John we read about God dwelling among us—coming literally in the flesh to share life with us in all its fullness, in all its messiness, in all the joys and challenges, unto death. It is this type of dwelling to which Christians are called—to live the good news so that the world might know of this God that came to dwell with us, so that the world might know the Word on the street.

*For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth...*

*Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight.*

*I will rejoice in Jerusalem and delight in my people; no more shall the sounds of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.*

*No more shall there be an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime...*

*They shall build houses and inhabit them; They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit...*

*Like the days of the tree shall the days of my people be...* (Isaiah 65:17-22).

This is God's vision for the shalom of the city and it reminds us of the famous text in Jeremiah 29: seek the peace of the city. It is indeed a revolutionary vision even; perhaps due to its simplicity. It is the small things like building houses and planting gardens that shape this vision for the city. Though our contexts and ministries are varied, these verses give us a glimpse into the ways God calls us to participate in shaping his vision for the city—a place where child mortality is no more and where old people actually have a role, or are really cared for, no matter what disability or illness they might have (v. 20), a place where the hard work put into building a house is shared work and work that is enjoyed by the very ones who have put brick upon brick (v. 21). Building houses and planting gardens require care and the help of others—they are by nature community-building activities.... You have to learn how to be a neighbour. The fruit of a garden is meant for sharing. God's vision for building houses and planting gardens is a community vision—a community whose days will be like the days of the tree—the tree of life. Embodying the Word on the street is learning to be this tree. Are we reading the Bible and shaping our lives to be this tree?
Let us look at another text in Isaiah and one that might be a bit more challenging. It is doubtful that anyone disagrees with the vision of the city of Isaiah 65, but in this other text, Isaiah 58, the prophet strikes closer to home partly because he gives us a vision for what the tree looks like and how it grows.

In some translations the subheading for Isaiah 58 reads “False and True Worship.” In other versions it reads “The True Fast.” It fits within the general section in Isaiah that begins in chapter 56, where the prophet turns his full attention to the characteristics of the new era—the time of the Lord, salvation for all the nations, and the glory of Jerusalem—this glory that was described in Isaiah 65 and many other texts. But here Isaiah looks at the characteristics of this new era by contrasting the blessings promised by God with the distressing attitude of the people of God. Here, he argues, humbling yourself is useless if it is merely a matter of appearing humble.

True worship is lived; it is embodying the Word of God. The faith that is lived is not simply about fasting or false humility—it is an active, holistic faith. It is faith that loosens the bonds of injustice, lightens the weight of those with heavy burdens, and sets the prisoner free. It is a glorious picture, a revolutionary picture, a picture of peace and justice that has often been picked up by Christians in Latin America and around the world to describe what the church needs to do: to denounce the injustice of dictatorships or colonialism. Yes, the text can be used this way. But the prophet warns us—are we criticising the other while doing nothing ourselves for justice in our own house? We cannot pretend to be humble with fasting and prayers when we are not even a people who strives for justice in our own homes and in our church or our own institutions and mission agencies.

Using Isaiah’s texts for public protests is not wrong. In fact, it is a very good reflection of one important sign of God’s kingdom: the justice, freedom, and peace that Jesus brings. And yet, there is more to this chapter in Isaiah that we in the church can easily forget because it is perhaps harder to deal with. It is more challenging because it is closer to home. It is sometimes easier to pray for a violent enemy across the border than it is for a next door neighbour with whom we do not get along. Or we pray and
work for world peace, but not for reconciliation with someone in the church or in the community that we do not like. Maybe one reason this Isaiah text is so revolutionary is because it reminds us to incarnate the good news for those that are.

Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn...

Then you shall call and the Lord shall answer...

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,

then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday sun (Isaiah 58:6-10).

In verse 7 and again in verse 10, Isaiah says share your bread. He also reminds us to share shelter, clothing, and healing—the poor should not just get what is left over, but we are called to give of our very selves on behalf of the needy (v. 10). Isaiah makes no distinction between the ethnicity or faith of the person that is to be served. Service and peacemaking, that is, being the hands and feet of Jesus on the street, knows no discrimination.

Sandwiched between verses 7 and 10, he says, “in these things your light will shine very brightly and God will answer your cry for help.” Then, at the end of verse 9, he hits closer to home again:

Remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil (Isaiah 58:9).

The revolutionary character of God’s people has everything to do with the daily matters of how we treat one another and how we use our tongue.

This is about sharing the burdens in-house, within the community, within the family, within the church. It is about saying things that build others up rather than put them
down; it is about not gossiping, not blaming others, or coming up with excuses for ourselves. Here, in a chapter about revolutions and the promises of God, the prophet says, “Watch how you speak!” This is harder to do, but this is also the Word on the street.

Let us look at one more passage. Paul’s letter to the Philippians is an extraordinary book. Some commentators say it is the apostle’s swan song; but really, it is a call to subversion. For Paul another world is possible. This letter, one of the so-called “prison epistles,” was dictated by Paul during the years he was imprisoned in Rome. Some think he wrote while in Ceasarea, still others say Ephesus. Wherever the place of writing, his message continues to be the same. What we must keep in mind is that Paul was in jail. He had endured beatings and threats, disappointments, and near-death experiences. He was persecuted, oppressed, and the victim of all sorts of violence. Now in prison his future was nebulous at best. The authorities, both civil and religious, did not sympathize with him or with his teachings. Despite all this, Philippians inspires faith, hope, love, joy, and a fighting and victorious spirit. Paul is grateful for the Christians in Philippi for their “communion in the gospel” (1:5) and for their “sharing in grace” (1:7). Paul responds in the only way a human being can and should respond: with a deep and joyful sense of gratitude.

After citing the glorious hymn of Christ’s humiliation and service—a hymn that calls to memory what true humility is, in contrast to the false humility noted in Isaiah—this hymn is about God’s faithfulness in exalting Jesus above all. After the hymn, Paul again reminds the Christians of what it looks like to embody God’s Word on the street.

Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless… in a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world (2:12-15).

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The Philippians are not perfect and Paul knows fully well the challenges of living out the faith, especially under difficult circumstances, as was the case for this small group that gathered by the riverbank to worship. Even for them, as the oppressed and persecuted minority in their place, there was the challenge of treating one another well. As was the case in the Isaiah text, here too we are warned of how we speak. The prophet said, “Do not speak evil.” Paul says, “Do not murmur or argue” (v. 14).

It is so tempting and so easy to complain, especially in the Christian circles. Just as children need to learn how to work out their differences, to be kind to one another, and not jealous, so also we need to learn to do the same—to know when to speak and what the right manner of speaking might be when there are disagreements or when we feel an injustice has happened. Too quickly we think we are always right. Yet, we must open ourselves to the humility Paul speaks of, open ourselves to the possibility that we might be wrong and that God wants to transform us and to make us instruments of his justice, but that God does it God’s way, not our way.

How do we embody the humility of Christ? How do we live out the good news in the way we treat one another and the way we treat our neighbour?

What is extraordinary and wonderful in this Philippians text is that like the Isaiah passage, here also is the promise that if we are careful in these seemingly small things like not murmuring or arguing, we will shine like stars! In Isaiah it says our gloom will be brighter than noonday;⁶ you will shine like stars in the darkness.⁷ This is the good news on the street. It is not lived for its own sake, but is lived so that others might also have this hope that is within us. It is evangelistic shining—the good news that is lived is the good news that shines as brightly as the tropical sun, such that others will want to join in with this very strange people and will join their stories to the one great story of Jesus.

God is at work in you, says Paul (Phil 2:13). It is truly extraordinary to recall that God himself dwells among us so that we are enabled to work for God’s pleasure. This is

⁶ Isa 58:10.
⁷ Phil 2:15.
a call and a promise to all of God’s people. We are all supposed to shine like stars in the
darkest night. Whatever urban ministry we are in, whatever work God has for you, you
are challenged to remind yourself about not whining, not complaining, not pointing
the finger, but to live and exemplify in word and service the peace of Christ, even
among those people with whom we do not get along. In these small acts of faithful
speech and true worship, in doing justice, and sharing bread, God’s promise is that
God’s people will shine like stars.

Dwelling in the city (or anywhere else) has to be personal. It is sharing the love of
Jesus one person at a time, even in a city of millions. It is about building new forms of
sharing life together that are lifeboats, not chicken coops, that make the living Word
possible.

Mission is about building friendships in the loneliest of places, of visiting the
prisoner and finding ways to share in his life even behind bars.

There is a small group of believers who gather weekly in New Delhi, India, to read
sacred texts and to share a meal. The people that gather have been told by the city
and by their culture that they are in competition with one another; they are taught
to oppress others and to accept their position as oppressed. Yet in the upper room
at this house, leaders of the backwards castes are offered food and shelter under one
condition—to share the table with those you do not get along with and with people
with whom you are in competition. It is a new form of sharing space and of learning
what reconciliation really means. It is a form of dwelling that challenges the powers
that be in that city and that culture.

The prophet Amos said that the day would come when there would be famine in
the land—not the famine of food or drink, but famine of the Word of God. 8 People
will search high and low, from north to south and east to west, but they will not find
the Word of the Lord. The city can numb our senses so that we become lukewarm. Yet
God dwelling among us is anything but lukewarm. The Word has come and God has
called each of us to be voices and hands and feet, together for that Word on the street.

8 Amos 8:11-12.
Not just the word of service, but the living and revolutionary Word that is the Bible. Is the Bible the word on the street?

We are called to a vibrant, living faith that shows the world, urban or rural, that another world is not only possible, but already dwells among us. What are the signs of the fullness of life? Where are these found in the city? Christian mission must be about such signs—learning from them, strengthening them, and sharing them in other cities so that if and when judgment comes, the church will be seen not as servants shuffling furniture on the deck of a sinking Titanic, but as those building the lifeboats, proclaiming the Word on the street, and shining like stars.

Dr. C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell is the executive director of the Theological Commission for the World Evangelical Alliance. She is a Brazilian Baptist theologian from São Paulo. Rosalee also serves as New Testament editor for the forthcoming Latin American Bible Commentary and is the author and editor of various books and articles.
Ewell begins with the question, “What does God have to say about cities?” Against popular notions that God is anti-urban, there is much to be found throughout the arc of Scripture that reveals God’s intentions, blueprints, and even future destiny of cities and urban life. While we find a more agrarian setting at the beginning of Genesis, when the fall in chapter 3 takes place, this original setting is disrupted and humanity begins its rural-to-urban migration. It is this trajectory of urbanization that we are still on today. It is at the crux of this story where there is a divergence of thought. Some contend that the scope of Scripture post-Genesis 3 is to return humanity to life pre-Genesis 3, thus making cities an aberration. But what if cities were indeed part of God’s intentions all along and that when we get to the fall and the first city in Genesis 4 (Enoch), that the urban trajectory was already set as an outflow of the nature of the triune God?

As Ewell addresses the topic of “biblical reflections on God’s reign in the city,” it is my contention that we need to start at the origins of humanity to see when God’s reign was established. We read the story of Eden in Genesis, then hold up that template to our current environment of global urbanization, and assume that something went horribly wrong. Instead, the basis of our urban existence is actually found in the triune nature of God and begins before creation. God is relational and made us relational and as such we were created for community. The follow-up question then is whether this community then necessitates cities. Community necessitates proximity which is the foundation for the formation of cities. If that is true, the question becomes, “How do we live in cities?”
The answer to this question forms the bulk of Ewell’s article as she articulates our posture of “dwelling.” She sets forth the idea of simply dwelling in our cities as the transformative catalyst to bring about change. Not necessarily in the *doing*, but simply in the *being*. She writes, “Perhaps the hope is not in redeeming the city as it is, but in finding alternative ways of dwelling, offering new spaces where God’s dwelling is seen and heard and touched and tasted.” God established his reign in cities before their existence and when we dwell in them, we do so as salt, light, and a city on the hill.

The best way forward is to rediscover what it means to dwell in the city. To be about the everyday normal things whether planting gardens, building houses, and rekindling a sense of neighborliness. If this posture and daily rhythms are adopted, one can see the power of the Gospel lived out in word and deed. Ewell summarizes this powerful apologetic:

“This is the good news on the street. It is not lived for its own sake, but is lived so that others might also have this hope that is within us. It is evangelistic shining—the good news that is lived is the good news that shines as brightly as the tropical sun, such that others will want to join in with this very strange people and will join their stories to the one great story of Jesus.”

Dr. Sean Benesh loves to explore cities. He concentrates on New Urbanism, theology of the city, urban spirituality, the city’s built environment, and how cities develop. He has published *Metrospiritual: The Geography of Church Planting*, *View From the Urban Loft: Developing a Theological Framework for Understanding the City*, and *The Multiplex Nucleated Church*. 
A chill winter’s night has fallen as we walk out of the Hauptbahnhof, Cologne’s central rail station along the Rhine. Entering the wintry plaza, we are awestruck by the massive, looming spires of Cologne Cathedral—black, white, gray, illuminated by hidden lights high on the spires.

The vision dominates everything. We and the crowds filling the square seem little crawling things.

I think of Jacques Ellul’s words: “The city is man’s greatest work”—the pinnacle of human technical achievement.

Technic city. In the case of Cologne Cathedral, the technology dates back to the 1200s. The technical breakthroughs—pointed arch, ribbed vaulting, flying buttress—birthed Gothic architecture. The technology was religious, theological: a monument to glorify God.

But of course the cathedral was also commercial (think relics, pilgrimages, fundraising), as well as political, social, cultural.

In other words, there is an ecology to it all—the cathedral, the city. A river; people; birds and animals; pigeons and rats; air, food, plague, pollution. All part of the story—and best grasped ecologically.

Cologne, one of Europe’s oldest cities, became a Roman colony in the days of the first Apostles. From early on the town had a Christian community. After the bones of the Three Wise Men came to Cologne as relics, the town attracted thousands of pilgrims. Building a cathedral made increasing economic, ecclesiastical, and political sense.

My wife and I visited Cologne shortly before Christmas. We were fascinated by the cathedral, the Christmas markets, the crowds. Then incidentally we discovered that
the huge building next to our hotel was Gestapo headquarters from 1935 to 1945; it is now a museum. Displays on the rise of Nazism and basement cellblocks alerted me to other realities of urban ecology through space and time.

**Urban Ecology**

*Ecology* is in fact a concept in space and time. Ecosystems thrive in particular places and localities; they emerge and change constantly with time. This is true of the ecology of the city and also of urban mission. We can best grasp the challenges of urban mission, in fact, if we view it ecologically.

There is such a thing as an urban ecosystem. Like all ecosystems, it involves inputs, throughputs, outputs, with complex interrelationships, and feedback loops.

This is true in a city’s every dimension. It is true physically: material goods, fuel, food, waste, and the networks linking them. It is true socially, with the complex of urban social systems of all sorts. It is true economically, politically, technologically, culturally.

I learned this in the 1980s when I pastored and worked at Olive Branch Mission in Chicago. Teaching urban intern students from mostly non-urban campuses, I stressed three key points: (1) Chicago is a city of neighborhoods; (2) each neighborhood is unique; yet (3) each neighborhood is enmeshed in a complex web of urban systems. You won’t understand urban mission if you don’t understand neighborhoods, diverse as they are. And you won’t understand neighborhoods if you don’t look *ecologically*, examining the complex interactions of people and systems, of physical and material things (water, roads, electricity, garbage); the whole range of life from microorganisms to dogs and cats to the flora and fauna of parklands.

Must then the urban missioner really understand all these things, be an expert in everything? No. That is impossible. It means this: effective urban mission requires an ecological mindset, an ecological sensitivity, and, at a practical working level, ecological knowledge.
An Ecological Approach to Urban Mission

Every city is an ecosystem intimately linked with a vast array of larger and smaller ecosystems. And Christians know the key, essential secret: the urban ecosystem can truthfully be understood only spiritually, in light of the revealed gospel of Jesus Christ.

What then is an ecological concept of urban mission? It is an approach to urban mission that makes the concept of ecology central to its every dimension so that mission can be as comprehensive as is the Christian gospel.

Formally, ecology is defined as the branch of science that deals with the relations of living things to one another and to their physical surroundings. This includes the study of human interaction with the environment in all its complexity. As a character in Barbara Kingsolver’s novel *Flight Behavior* comments, ecology means studying “biological communities. How populations interact. It does not mean recycling aluminum cans.”

Christians know that our human environment is more than just the physical world, or even the social-physical world. It includes all God has made—all things, visible and invisible, on earth and in heaven, as the Apostle Paul emphasizes (Col 1:16 and Eph 1:10, e.g.). The important biblical phrase “all things” opens a window into the ecological character of the biblical worldview and hence of all Christian mission.

What I mean, therefore, is that we must define Christian mission as comprehensively as the breadth and depth of the Christian gospel, and as deeply and broadly as the actual nature of the urban environment in all its dimensions—in its “all-things-ness.” This is my key point.

Unless we thus think ecologically, we will forever be battling half-truths, lopsidedness, and overemphasis in some areas and under-emphasis in others.

An ecological concept of urban mission has five key elements:

1. *Ecological sensitivity and awareness in considering every aspect and dimension of urban mission.* Ecology is a mindset, a sensitivity—almost like an awareness of music.

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It’s a lens—a way of seeing, as much caught as taught.

Ecological alertness means seeing every aspect of urban mission (no exceptions) through an ecological lens. One is forever asking: How does this relate to that? How does this action affect that situation, or those people, or that piece of urban landscape? It means knowing that every effect has multiple causes, and every cause births multiple effects—not all perceived or understood—and also multiple feedback loops.

Effective urban mission requires thinking, planning, and acting ecologically.

2. An ecological concept of urban mission means recognizing the essential, critical role of spiritual realities in every urban ecosystem. This is the sworn enemy of dualisms and compartmentalization. Nothing in the city is not spiritual, one way or another. Probably at some deep level every urbanite senses this, if not during the day, at least in wakeful nighttime hours. The spirituality of the city stirs musicians and artists and poets.

Here enters the uniquely Christian contribution. Christians recognize not only the reality of the spirit; they know how to name the spirits. They know that the key reality is Jesus Christ made real to people by the Holy Spirit. Centered in this reality they know, or can learn, how to pull all other spiritual strands into proper perspective and relation to each other.

In other words, Christians are Christians. They dwell in the city not just with human resources, but with divine revelation. They proclaim and seek boldly to embody Jesus Christ in the city. Since they understand this revelation ecologically, they present not a one-dimensional gospel or church or mission, nor certainly a “spiritual” gospel that denies the reality and legitimate priorities of the “physical.” They embody an ecological gospel that is as multidimensional and multidimensionally relevant, as is the living Jesus Christ, present now in the power of the Spirit.

Effective urban mission means Christians serving as channels of “the one thing needful,” the reality of spiritual life and illumination that comes uniquely through Jesus Christ.

3. An ecological approach to urban mission means recognizing the importance
of physical, social, economic, and cultural dimensions in urban mission. Again, no
dualisms. If Christians insist on the reality and priority of things spiritual, they also
insist on the reality and proper role of things physical. This of course means things
cultural in all dimensions, for culture begins with physical things—food, weather,
water, the materials from which we build our homes, literature, and social spaces.

The unique Christian contribution involves the recognition of the constant flow
between things spiritual and things material. An ecological concept of urban mission
opens missional space to talk about and mess with politics, economics, poetry,
technology, healthcare, water quality, building codes, orchestras, poverty, education,
family life, gender relationships, and everything else. It is constantly saying: “This, and
also that.”

Effective urban mission means connecting the spirit to everything that is (or appears
to be) non-spirit and recognizing the reality and priority of every physical dimension
of God’s good creation.

4. An ecological conception of urban mission means recognizing the essential role of
face-to-face community.

Ecology is all about relationships. Ecosystems of living things are social
communities. What then is human community? It is a kind of ecosystem embedded
in other ecosystems. Human communities are biological communities. They are of
course much more than this, so we resist reductionism. Any human community—
family, neighborhood, city, church—is much more than a biological community, but
it is not less than this.

Human community exists at many levels. The ancient Greeks understood this;
witness their various terms based on oikos (family or household), from oikonomos
(household steward), to oikonomia (economy or plan of a household or city), to
oikomene (the inhabited earth); hence our terms economy and ecology.

Christians stress face-to-face community for both sociological and theological
reasons: sociologically because we recognize the social power of face-to-face
community, and theologically because we believe humans are created uniquely in the
image of God and profoundly reflect Trinitarian truth. At heart these two reasons are one, for the very sociology of human beings is theologically based: our creation in the image of Holy Trinity.

An ecological concept of urban mission means recognizing the priority of face-to-face community because that's the way we are created and how we function: in community. Life in community may often be dysfunctional, but life without community becomes suicidal. We are social beings.

Effective urban mission requires attention to all kinds of community, but especially to face-to-face community, for this is most basic and it is where identity is formed or malformed. This bears constant emphasis as the Internet and various forms of virtual community become ever present.

In an ecological conception of urban ministry, four forms of face-to-face community are most essential: family, neighborhood, church, and small-scale communities such as clubs and civic organizations. These form the infrastructure of society and are key to its health or its dysfunction. Simply put, they are key to urban ecology, so they necessarily play a large role in effective urban mission.

Redemptive urban mission will engage a whole range of issues, no doubt, from the micro to the macro level—not only neighborhoods but also systems and macrostructures. If not grounded in face-to-face community, however, mission will ultimately be ineffective and will burn out from lack of oxygen.

Face-to-face community is, humanly speaking, the life-source of effective urban mission.

5. An ecological conception of urban mission will be based in a functional, biblical ecclesiology. It will teach and embody expressions of the body of Christ that reflect New Testament teaching.

There are big debates about “biblical ecclesiology,” of course. What I mean is fairly simple: a focus on the church as the visible community of Jesus followers in particular places. Despite variations reflecting different traditions, I find much consensus across the spectrum of Christianity as to the essentials of (at least) local Christian community.
My own take on this focuses on the three key elements of worship, community, and witness as the ecology of congregational life.²

Whatever the tradition, effective urban mission today will be grounded in local, living communities of koinonia, worship, and varieties of witness. Its shared life will be more organic than institutional; more relational than programmatic. But it will also find forms and structures that effectively build the church and help it engage the surrounding urban context.

Key here is a focus on the priesthood of believers, the gifts of the Spirit, and (accordingly) equipping believers for ministry, as taught especially in Ephesians 4:1-16. In my experience, without fail, urban churches that redemptively engage their world have figured out how to practice spiritual gifts and the ministry of all believers; how to practice the “one-another” teachings of the New Testament and to equip all believers for ministry even as they grow in grace.

Effective urban mission must be grounded in visible, redemptive Christian community.

How to embody the powerful gospel of Jesus Christ transformingly in cities today? The answer: Urban mission marked by (1) an ecological mindset, (2) focus on spiritual realities, (3) attention also to physical and cultural realities, (4) face-to-face relationships, and (5) visible Christian community that resembles in its essence the body of Christ as pictured in the New Testament. Together, these five components constitute the ecology of redemptive urban mission. These elements all function in ecological interconnection, with constant feedback loops.

Three Big Objections

This ecological approach to urban mission raises a raft of questions. Here are three:

1. This is all too overwhelming. If ecology necessary involves everything, we drown in the totality of it all. It’s too big to be practical. Don’t we risk losing sharp focus by

looking at everything? How do we keep balance, establish priorities, keep fresh the
gospel’s transforming, redemptive edge?

Answer: We must see the big picture, and this is in fact the big picture. Theologically
we can interpret it through biblical teachings, models, and metaphors. Particularly
crucial are passages such as John 1, Ephesians 1, Colossians 1, and Hebrews 1. We start
where those books start: with the big picture viewed in light of the large economy and
ecology of God.

From the big picture, constantly reiterated, we move to the actual practice of
Christian community. This is what Paul does in his letters. We take our cue from
Ephesians 4:4-7:

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of
your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who
is above all and through all and in all. [The big picture.] But each of us was
given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift. [The particularization and
application.]

This is how the ecology of urban mission works. It is what Paul does all the time.

In Romans he begins with “the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand” (Rom
1:1-2) and ends with Priscilla and Aquila and their house church (Rom 16:3-4). We
best find the particular and specific within the ecology of the big picture.

This is what Jesus did, showing the big picture (the kingdom of God) and bringing
this home to specific people and needs and building community.

In the actual practice of Christian community, working with the fruit and gifts of the
Spirit in local contexts and neighborhoods, we learn how to strategize and determine
priorities. The Spirit leads, joining the big picture to specific times, places, and persons.
This is why I stress ecclesiology.

An ecological perspective helps us here. We find ourselves involved in a complex
ecology of grace where we neither fully understand nor control everything. So we
strive to be faithful and trust the Spirit to weave the particular into the larger ecology
of his redemptive purposes within the complex ecology of our world.
2. *This approach requires major professional expertise.* Where can we find specialists in urban ecology in all its complexity? The necessary skills and knowledge are way beyond most churches, especially small or poor ones.

There are two answers to this objection, one which involves clarification and the other *networking.*

Clarification: An ecological concept of urban ministry does not mean people have to be academically trained in ecology. Ordinary people can develop practical ecological sense. We learn, and learn to feel, that everything is tied to everything else both by immersing ourselves in Scripture and by paying attention to what we’re increasingly learning about the world around us.

Networking: We need each other. Every church needs other churches, and may need specialized ministries that provide resources for particular challenges. Most cities, as well, are full of resources of various sorts. The key is networking on the basis of and out of the strength of local, living Christian community.

3. *Isn't this ecological approach pressing an analogy way too far?* Is it legitimate actually to take a concept from science and apply it to urban mission? Isn’t this a mismatch of categories?

No. This approach makes sense for three reasons. First, the ecological sensitivity we learn from studying living systems helpfully illuminates urban life and ministry, both by way of analogy and in *actual fact,* since urban mission exists within and is part of the real ecology of cities.

Second, the Bible itself radiates an ecological sensitivity based in the very nature of creation and gospel. Modern ecological science actually appropriates realities already embedded in the biblical revelation. The Bible is ecological.

Third, bringing this biblical ecological sensitivity into conversation with today’s ecological science births new insights. Ecology as applied to the church and ministry is more than metaphor. It illuminates realities long overlooked.

The smallest microorganisms and micro-ecosystems reveal dynamics that function on much larger scales. Ecological principles run all through God’s magnificent creation.
To repeat: The city and urban mission are much more than ecological phenomena, but they are not less. We will understand both city and mission better, at more profound levels, as we view them ecologically.

**The Ecology of the City**

The city is an ecosystem interacting with multiple other ecosystems. This is the reality that underlies an ecological view of urban mission.

**The City as Ecosystem.** The city is an ecosystem physically, socially, culturally. But Christians know, as Jacques Ellul discerned, that the city is also a spiritual reality. Better: It is a spiritual ecosystem. It is the locus of principalities and powers of all sorts. Its dynamics are affected by prayer, by worship, by Christian community, and by multiple forms of Christian witness. Its life is shaped as much by spiritual things as by physical things—probably more.

This is fact, not theory. The city is a complex interplay between its physicality and its spirituality. This is what makes the church of Jesus Christ unique. As the body of Christ, the church knows the secret. “We wrestle” in multiple dimensions. And the church’s impact—redemptively or not—flows in all these directions, follows all these paths and byways. The church’s impact is both physical and spiritual, with the two in constant interaction—as we know personally, with our own body-spirit struggles. So urban mission necessarily touches everything, including how we do or do not care for creation.

The city, in other words, is inescapably and necessarily part of the non-urban environment. City and non-city depend upon each other for their very existence. You can’t have Chicago without downstate Illinois and Lake Michigan, or Singapore without oceans. They are all part of one ecology. The literal, watery connection between Lake Michigan and earth’s oceans reminds us that every urban ecosystem is connected with the global ecosystem.

**The City and the Land.** Today much of the world is rapidly urbanizing. Usually urbanization is treated however as though it were only a matter of cities.
But urbanization is always only half the story. The other story, of equal ultimate importance, concerns the land—the land that remains and does not move to the city. People move to cities and leave the land behind, but they do not leave their dependence upon the land. Yet, as people move to cities, they lose ancient wisdom about the land.

Urban ecology therefore must include the land and its wisdom. Therefore, urban mission, viewed ecologically, will include the land in its scope.

Our grandparents or great-grandparents understood much about the land. Most knew how to farm, of course. But, equally important, they knew about birds, plants, animals, the flow of rivers, the changing of seasons, the stars, and the cycles of nature. They knew about medicinal plants. They knew how to grow food, and the fresh tang of fruits and vegetables straight from the garden rather than those manufactured in factories.

This is no longer the case for city dwellers the world over. Yet we know—both theologically and increasingly scientifically—that human flourishing requires living in contact with the land, with nature, with the created order. It’s built into us as part of God’s plan.

Without this bond with the land and its creatures we suffer what Richard Louv calls “nature-deficit disorder.” Human development, and especially childhood development, is hampered by lack of unstructured interface with the world of nature.3

If we speak of urbanization we must speak also of the land, and what has been lost in the move to the cities. In the study and practice of urban mission, we must heed the land as well as the city. We learn that our cities depend for their very existence on land—both the land they occupy and often pollute, and the land that supplies their food and water.

This doesn’t mean Christians should move out of cities and into rural areas. What must happen rather is the recovery of ancient wisdom about the land, and thus the recovery of a harmony between land and people. We must come to understand the real, actual ecology of our relationship with the beautiful but vulnerable created order.

(urban and non-urban) that God has given us.

This has big meanings for urban mission. No person and no church is healthy without healthy interaction with the land. No mission is holistic if it does not include the biblical, covenantal relationship with the land and all God’s creatures (Gen 9). No city can be healthy and sustainable over time if it does not learn to live in sustainable harmony with the land.

Here is a call for creativity. It raises issues of urban farming, cooperatives, community markets, trees and flowers, artwork, and poetry. It presents the challenge of getting city people out to the country from time to time and country people into the cities.

**Center Church: The Gospel in New York**

New York City has been the scene of much effective urban mission over centuries. Some of America’s earliest and most creative city ministries began there. In its great complexity, New York to this day offers varied examples of redemptive urban mission, ranging from creative church multiplication to specialized ministries of many sorts.

One of the most creative and comprehensive is Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, led by senior pastor Timothy Keller. Founded in 1989 without a building, the Redeemer Church has grown rapidly. Today it attracts some 5,000 people to multiple services at three different sites, though much of its emphasis is on discipleship and church multiplication. Its conception of discipleship is serious but broad, for the church aims “to renew the city socially, spiritually, and culturally.” Redeemer has helped plant over a hundred other congregations throughout the metropolitan area.

In his book *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*, Keller sets out a strategy for reaching cities multidimensionally, using ecological models. Keller outlines a vision embodying three core commitments: gospel-centered, city-centered, and movement-centered. He understands this vision ecologically.

Keller argues that cities can be transformed when a tipping point is reached—“when the number of gospel-shaped Christians in a city becomes so large that Christian influence on the civic and social life of the city—and on the very culture—is
recognizable and acknowledged.” Keller writes,

*There is no scientific way to precisely determine a city’s tipping point—the point at which the gospel begins to have a visible impact on the city life and culture. In New York City, we pray for and work toward the time when 10 percent of the center city population is involved in a gospel-centered church. In Manhattan, this would amount to about 100,000 people.*

Keller’s proposals breathe the spirit of gospel optimism—based not on human ingenuity, but in the power of God working through Christians who are savvy both about the gospel and about urban dynamics.

There is nothing unrealistic or outlandish about this vision. The gospel is powerful enough. Where sin abounds, grace can visibly abound yet more.

Keller’s vision and proposals are worth considering, particularly in light of Redeemer Church’s impact and given Keller’s sensitivity to the dynamic of movements and of ecological realities. The book is a good resource in developing an ecological conception of urban mission.

Keller’s approach is limited in some respects; people from other theological traditions may not be comfortable with aspects of the church’s conservative Reformed perspective. Keller’s emphasis on the ecology of church, city, and movements, however, acknowledges the complexity of urban mission and the fact that God works through various church forms and traditions.

I celebrate Keller’s ecological approach, but would press it further. Keller uses the concept of ecology only analogically. “Likening a gospel city movement to a biological ecosystem is an analogy,” he writes. The church and gospel ministry are different from “a biological ecosystem.” Yet he notes that “the image of the ecosystem conveys how different organisms are interdependent, how the flourishing of one group helps the other groups flourish.”

True, but we can push the ecological paradigm further, beyond analogy. Effective urban mission requires that we break through to a real ecological awareness of

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5 Ibid., 378.
church, city, and mission.

Much of the dynamic of Viv Grigg’s prophetic ministry among the world’s urban poor, highlighted in his article “Hovering Spirit, Creative Voice, Empowered Transformation: A Retrospective,” in the first issue of the New Urban World journal, springs from his large-scale ecological sensitivity and models. Though Grigg does not generally use the term ecology in the sense I mean here, his ministry in its comprehensiveness can best be understood by viewing it through an ecological lens.

Conclusion: Ecology of the Church in Mission

Urban mission is more comprehensive and effective the more it’s viewed ecologically. Just as the city is an ecosystem so in another sense the church, (the body of Christ) is an ecosystem—globally and locally. How the two interact defines the shape of mission.

Christians without ecological awareness miss key dimensions of mission just as surely as secular ecologists miss key dimensions of the spirit. As ecology is more than metaphor, so the body of Christ is more than metaphor. The church is an organism that partakes of the mystery of the very body of Jesus Christ and the mystery of the Trinity—and as such, is called into mission.

Dr. Howard A. Snyder has pastored and taught in several cities, including Detroit, Michigan (1966-68); São Paulo, Brazil (1969-74); Chicago, Illinois (1980-88); Dayton, Ohio (1988-96); and Toronto, Ontario (2007-12). He is now retired after teaching positions at Asbury Theological Seminary and Tyndale Seminary, Toronto. He authored several books, including The Problem of Wineskins and Salvation Means Creation Healed.
In “The Ecology of Urban Mission,” Howard A. Snyder proposes an ecological approach to urban mission that provides a helpful alternative to overly simplistic or reductionistic ways of understanding the city as a field for mission. In addition to Snyder’s strong case for an ecological approach and development of a framework for what an ecological approach might entail in most global contexts, I would like to propose here an additional element important for applying his model in a North American, or any, context in which suburbs take on a significant role in the make up of the urban area.

Snyder is right to suggest that ecology has had a growing impact on how we understand issues of all kinds and should shape our approach to mission. But what I find especially helpful to note about the role of ecological thinking is to take note of the specific way this approach came to be a part of our public discourse in the United States. In *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson put ecology on the map by showing how the kinds of pesticides farmers used on their crops eventually got into the milk that we were giving to our children. This urgent ecological case study led to strong public support for the banning of certain pesticides and the eventual creation of the EPA.

What we can learn from the impact of a book like *Silent Spring* is that interest in ecology gains traction when it allows us to identify a significant threat to our wellbeing. Before that discovery, ecology may have seemed like a technically valid, but somewhat obscure, topic of conversation. I would suggest that in addition to Snyder’s argument we consider the ecological imbalance caused by the North American suburban experiment during the second half of the twentieth century.
Snyder rightly points out the symbiotic connection between city life and rural life, and I would add the additional ways that suburban sprawl represents a significant threat to both.

While radically different on the surface, both city life and rural life share something in common. They are both sustainable systems for human thriving. Farms capitalize on the productive possibilities inherent in our relationship with the land. And cities open up productive possibilities inherent in our relationships with one another (or social capital). Whereas the suburbs, in attempting to combine the convenience of the city with the open spaces of the farm, have led to some of the most wasteful use of resources and infrastructure imaginable.

Not only are the suburbs unsustainable from a resource perspective, they are not good for human community either. Snyder rightly points to the essential role of face-to-face community in mission. By extending average commute times and requiring multiple automobile trips for meeting basic needs of everyday life, the suburbs have radically curtailed opportunities for face-to-face contact with others in public settings.

I agree with Snyder’s claim that an ecological approach is absolutely essential for understanding mission in an urban context and additionally I think that it is nearly impossible to make sense of North American cities without considering the disruptive role of the suburban experiment of the later half of the twentieth century.

Dr. Eric O. Jacobsen is senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Tacoma, Washington. He is the author of The Space Between: A Christian Engagement with the Built Environment; Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith; and numerous articles exploring connections between the Christian community, the church, and traditional neighborhoods. He is also the coeditor of Traditions in Leadership and The Three Tasks of Leadership.
Undoubtedly there are those who will brush aside Snyder’s provocative analysis as too nuanced. “Just preach the Gospel,” they will say, “and God will give the increase.” Such a simplistic dismissal, however nobly intentioned, ignores both the biblical precedent for urban mission and the realities of life in most modern cities.

If just preaching the gospel was enough, why, then, did the Apostle Paul not write a single form letter for distribution to Christians in all the cities where he had preached? Clearly, it was because the issues of Corinth differed from those of the Galatians, and the Colossians faced issues less relevant to those in Thessalonica, Rome, or Ephesus. Instead, Paul treated each on a case-by-case basis, paying special heed to the interaction of Christians in these diverse locales and the social, religious, and political systems of which they were a living part. He acknowledged the differences and unique needs of Christians in each of these cities, guiding them so that they could become a transformational community within their communities.

Mission is about change. Ignorance to enlightenment, doubt to faith, sin to righteousness, damnation to salvation, and hate to love are the great transformational themes of the Bible, and they are endemic to the purpose of Christian mission, wherever that mission may lead. In the great cities of our world, the transformational task is often complicated by the hive of systems that exist in the human cultures there. Thus, Snyder is directly on point when he draws the parallel between the fragile and interwoven systems of the natural world (ecosystems) and the complex and sometimes equally fragile systems that comprise any localized human community. It is presumptuous,
ill-advised, and ultimately futile to attempt the transformation of communities whose systems we do not thoroughly understand. Attaining such grasp will not only aid in God’s transformation of such communities, but have the added bonus of enriching those who would minister to them through the gleaning of new and valuable skills and the rich joy of touching other spirits.

In modern law enforcement, we learned (or perhaps re-learned) in the 1980s what the old-time officers who walked the beat instead of driving around in air-conditioned cruisers knew. If you don’t know the people, how they think, why they think that way, what influences them for good or ill, how they talk and who they talk to, how they group together and around what issues, you will always be an alien presence in their midst. The citizens and the officers will misunderstand, fear, and mistrust one another, and as a result they will fail to assist one another and the community will suffer.

My introduction to this mystery was as a community services officer in a large suburban Texas community comprised of 16 separate neighborhoods. Task one was to learn the city, and so I cruised from neighborhood to neighborhood in my unmarked patrol car, and walked the streets at night, talking with people from all walks of life. In less than a week, I understood clearly that, in practice, there was more about these neighborhoods that was different than was the same. While one neighborhood was a virtual slum, populated heavily by non-white minorities, a gated enclave not two miles distant sported million-dollar mansions owned by professional football, basketball, and baseball players. While palatial homes clustered around two of the municipality’s five lakes belonged to the *nouveau riche* who made killings in microchips and the stock market, those along the creek that meandered through the town were monuments to old money made in the oilfields. The places along the freeway were middleclass dwellings with overblown mortgages and two-career couples trying to raise families. All of these people rarely spoke to each other and shunned the police until they had an emergency. They had no concept that each had something to offer the others, and that by joining hands and working together toward a common good and against the
common enemy of urban decay they could build a collective life that would be better, safer, and richer than the pointless fortress mentality that built walls between the various sub-communities and between the residents and those sworn to protect their lives and property.

To be an effective change agent involved becoming a universal advocate, listening to all sides, suggesting blended solutions wherein everyone could get what they needed. It entailed hours of listening, hard bargaining, representing truth to power, taking risks, and an endless exercise of patience. Most of all, it took investment in growing an ever-deepening understanding of all of these groups. All of this was prerequisite to convincing them that the only agenda that mattered was their wellbeing. Christian mission is like that. Urban communities increasingly respond poorly to hit-and-run evangelism where, like traveling salespeople, we hawk our wares and move on. Our biggest breakthrough in community policing came when two of our officers bought homes in our most rundown neighborhood, cleaned them up, and moved in. Urban mission is like that. If you don’t take the trouble to understand and work through the ecosystems, expect that much of the seed will fall on shallow soil. Howard Snyder is right on point.

Dr. James R. Maddux served as professor and then dean of a Christian college for ten years, before enjoying a successful 11-year pastoral ministry in Houston, Texas. Later, he spent seven years in the law enforcement community, with specialization in community affairs, crime prevention, and street gang intervention. He joined Healthy Family Initiatives, a hospital-based organization, working to provide high-risk new parents with the parenting skills, socioeconomic support systems, and knowledge of child protection laws, with an end goal of keeping their newborns safe, secure, and out of the protective system.
Many organizations now fly the flag of integral mission, but very few really know what this means on the ground.

Often, holistic transformation is treated programmatically, entrusted to a handful of personnel who are responsible for “spiritual” activities such as evangelism, prayer, and worship. The rest of the organization then conducts its microfinance, health, education, or income-generating projects in much the same way secular organizations would do so. The two are dichotomized and run on parallel lines that do not quite meet.

This is quite unlike the way Jesus operated. To him, all the circumstances of life were occasions for enlarging the frame in which people moved and viewed their lives. Parties became settings for teaching humility instead of pride of place, sharpening understanding of who eventually gets to eat at the Great Banquet.¹ The journey to Jerusalem ignited ambition and expectations of glory among the disciples, which Jesus then turned into a teaching moment on leadership as servanthood.²

Such landmark teachings on the nature of the kingdom happened in the course of everyday life—except perhaps for the Sermon on the Mount and the cluster of teachings on signs of the end towards the close of his life—Jesus taught contingently. He seized events and incidents as opportunities for creating awareness of the new world he was inaugurating in their midst.

Similarly, we need to help people know God and become aware of his presence, not only through evangelistic programs, but through the daily struggle of discerning his hand and honoring him through the quality of our work. Our organizations should be

² Mark 10:32-45.
such that all who come near are also drawn to Jesus. Unfortunately, an Indian friend once told me that in his context, Hindus who work in faith-based organizations rarely get impressed enough to want to become Christians.

Ultimately, our impact as organizations depends on the ability of our people on the ground to live as signs of the new narrative that God is weaving in the community. “Holism is in the person, not in the program,” Jayakumar Christian insightfully reminds us. Our staff need to be trained to be sensitive to those moments when the new world that has come is birthing itself within the rhythms and routines of people’s lives.

This truth struck me afresh in a project that our Institute was doing in Batasan, the third largest urban poor community in India. The project manager called my attention to her fear that the field organizer was spending too much time doing Bible studies with a street gang, which was not part of the project design. The closing activities lined up in the logframe were quite behind schedule.

The Bible study was at the invitation of a woman who was feared in the neighborhood and mysteriously had resources to feed about 45 street kids each night, who belonged to one of the toughest and fiercest gangs in the community. Within a two-kilometer radius were about 50 street gangs who sowed terror and erupted periodically into gang wars. I sensed that it was extraordinary that this gang, who named themselves Halik ni Hudas (Kiss of Judas) would even sit for a five-minute Bible study, which was all the attention span they could manage, given that most were either drunk or half-drugged from sniffing rugby.3

So even if it was not in the project design, I encouraged the project leader not to worry and simply follow where the Spirit was leading, as it seemed he had his hand on it. I said I would answer to the donor organization and explain why the project had stalled and had moved into an unexpected direction.

Three years later, we saw these street kids transformed. Most have gone back and reconciled with their dysfunctional families, as we found that 70 percent of those kids

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3 Rugby is a glue that is inhaled by the user. Rugby, and the use of other ordinary household products, is widespread across much of the Majority World.
were out in the streets, not just because of poverty, but because they come from broken homes and have been abused sexually or physically, or were given away to relatives who maltreated them. Once semi-literate and out of school, they have now streamed themselves into jobs, literacy classes, and vocational schooling.

They formed an association, *Kabataang Malaya* (Youth Liberated) that reaches out to other gangs. They had turned the community’s only cleared space, which was used as a battlefield for gang wars, into a basketball court where they now hold annual basketball games. The gang wars ceased, the crime rate dropped dramatically, and the people now walk about at night and no longer shut their small *sari-sari* (convenience) stores at dusk. A grateful community now helps a small church of young people that has grown out of this work even without our meaning to do church-planting.

We could have missed the work that the Spirit wanted to do if we stuck to our logframe and exited from the community as soon as the funds ran out. Fairly sophisticated, we had to learn anew that transformation only really happens when our people are sensitive to the spiritual realm, to that margin of mystery where all our calculations collapse, and we become aware of an unseen power that orders our life and work.

To be truly holistic means to be aware that there is not a moment when we are not bearing witness. We are either authenticating the presence of a new world, or negating its presence by our inability to discern those subtle and hidden movements of the Spirit and organize everything around the reality of Jesus and his kingdom.

**Melba Padilla-Maggay** is founder and president of the Institute for Studies in Asian Church and Culture. She has had cross-cultural experience in over 40 countries on five continents. She is sought after as a speaker and consultant, particularly on the interface of religion, culture, and development.
For 20 years I have given myself to grassroots movements of hope among some of the world’s most vulnerable and poorest people. Through the community of Word Made Flesh, we have helped establish multiethnic, multinational, and ecumenical communities across the globe.

In South Asia, we founded the region’s first pediatric AIDS care home, offering a safe haven and family to children orphaned because of AIDS or who themselves are suffering with the disease.

During West Africa’s infamous “Blood Diamonds” civil war, rebels controlled 60 percent of the territory in conflict—while we brought vision, volunteers, and resources, ultimately establishing a community to address the needs of children who were forced to fight in battle.

Throughout Eastern Europe, South America, and Southeast Asia, we have supported the journey of many women and children trafficked into prostitution from commercial sex trade to freedom.

Around the world we have invested in communities of youth who live on the streets, in sewers or slums. Some of these children work on trash heaps scavenging for recyclable or resell-able items. Many are so hungry they “smoke” cellophane bags of paint or glue to curb the hunger pangs. In the worst cases some are forced to sell sex as their only option for survival.

Our vocation of hope has literally taken us all over the world, having lived on four continents and traveled to nearly 70 countries.

I’ve seen a lot. I’ve sacrificed a lot. I’ve received a lot. I’ve learned a lot.

There’s much good being done in the world and there’s much more that needs to be done.
It will take awakened individuals to make change. It will take transformed communities to forge lasting partnerships towards hope. It will take a movement.

Though activists and social justice workers live faithfully into compelling vocations of compassion, they can sometimes be the grumpiest, crustiest, and meanest people out there—often down right unpleasant folks to be around.

Many who fight to alleviate poverty are unhappy. Loneliness and sadness are familiar companions in their work for hope.

Sometimes the stereotypical “dirty hippie” social justice advocate offers an uninviting example of how to serve beautifully for the common good.

Many practitioners involved in causes, charities, or communities of hope often do a much better job of taking care of those they serve than they do taking care of themselves.

Sadly, many social justice activists are unhealthy—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Of course, this is understandable given that most folks involved in grassroots work in places of poverty experience versions of secondary post-traumatic stress disorders. What they see, the work they do, and the solidarity of suffering with their exploited friends ultimately takes a toll on their personal health.

It is the luxury of the non-poor to be able to make healthy choices and options for themselves, but in many cases this comes with a price—feelings of guilt or undue self-critiques of entitlement.

Often those engaged in the difficult work of justice perpetually teeter on the edge of burnout. Countless young people sign-up for volunteer opportunities, internships and even careers of service and, while some find ways to sustain and thrive in these callings, most are not as fortunate. It’s not uncommon for activists to leave vocations of service disillusioned. Some even walk away from their faith.

*We can live better.*

*We can love better.*

*We can serve better.*

*… We can do good better.*
Gravity, a Center for Contemplative Activism, is a grounding place for people to root their social engagement in a deep, contemplative spirituality in order to do good better.

Gravity doesn’t exist simply for social justice activists, but for anyone and everyone who wants to make the world a better place. This is tough work and everyone involved needs to be grounded in the effort to bring love, hope, and peace to the world.

Through Gravity we will host three- to four-day contemplative retreats and one-day contemplative sessions to introduce contemplative spirituality—demystifying and dismantling the intimidating barriers that often keep people from cultivating contemplative practices that nourish the soul.

We will develop a brokerage for trained and certified spiritual directors to connect with those who are in search of capable spiritual direction.

We will equip people for personal retreat and sabbatical.

We will facilitate pilgrimage to significant spiritual centers such as Assisi, Italy and Santiago, Spain. Harmonizing the dissonance between our inner and outer lives, these pilgrimages offer opportunities of spiritual awakening.

We will organize immersion trips of solidarity with those enslaved in the commercial sex industry, victimized in sweatshops, and dehumanized in slums and red-light areas. Small, thoughtfully selected groups of conversation partners will travel to cities like Kolkata, India; Kathmandu, Nepal; Bangkok, Thailand; Lima, Peru; and La Paz/El Alto, Bolivia.

Through Gravity, a Center for Contemplative Activism, we will support those who want to do good better. Visit our blog to learn more and get involved: http://www.gravitycenter.CO.

**Christ Heurtz** was named one of *Outreach Magazine*’s “30 Emerging Influencers Reshaping Leaders.” Chris is a curator of unlikely friendships, an instigator for good, a champion of collaboration, and a witness to hope. He is the author of *Unexpected Gifts: Discovering the Way of Community*. Chris launched Gravity, a Center for Contemplative Activism.
The ground around the feet
of a child with no shoes
is always holy.
Always sacred.
Always light with no shadow.
Always presence,
Always spirit and flesh.

Where most deem
the divine too scared to shed his skin
In cardboard castles and shotgun bruises.
On the streets
of the paupers and the pimps.
The destitute who smile their
gums at the world.

It is on these pavements that we meet God.
Or, as is the case of my life
It is on these streets
I met those
who meet God.

They sang in the worship
Of one forgotten by too many.
They sang because they knew what I could not.
They sang because they must.
In the blankets of a shedding skin.
In the wake of eyes turned to the sun.
In the dust that helped us see.
In the ash they smeared upon my face.

What could I do
But take off my own shoes
Make holy feet.
Join the children upon their ground.
A sacrament of this forgotten space.
This grace
That tied the world to a cross.

The ground around the feet
of a child with no shoes
is always holy.

Joel Mckerrow is a performance poet, author, educator, and activist from Melbourne, Australia. He is the founder of The Centre for Poetics and Justice, a not-for-profit community arts organisation focused on using poetics as a form of literary education, self-expression, and social engagement for marginalised teenagers. His website is www.joelmckerrow.com.
At the famous 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference (a consultation that continues to influence global mission strategy today) Bishop V. Samuel Azariah of South India applauded the heroic and self-denying labors of missionaries, but famously appealed to those delegates who came from sending countries for something he considered to be even more important than either missionaries or money:

>You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We also ask for love. Give us friends!2

Azariah understood friendship as a concrete expression of the love that is the dynamic power of the gospel that changes the world. It is central to both the life and the mission of the church, and so it was not enough for there to be a mission that changed social structures, converted people, healed bodies, and relieved poverty if there was no real friendship between missionaries and those they ministered to. It was counterproductive if they offered the gift of the gospel of reconciliation while they themselves remained separated from the people they ministered to. It was not enough if the missionaries were influential leaders, evangelists, agents of change, and social reformers, but were not actually friends with the people of the church.

There are many factors, good and ill, that can inhibit friendships and keep ministers and missionaries apart from those to whom they minister: cultural differences, the conviction that the church or the individual should be allowed to develop in their own way, a desire not to become too emotionally involved, feelings of superiority, a sense of propriety and position, and the desire to retain control can all play a part. But the gospel cannot flourish in situations where people stand apart from real, genuine

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1 Adapted from a forthcoming book on friendship as a model of our relationship with God, the primary form of relationship within the church and the foundation of mission.
friendship and fellowship. Evangelism, social change, or church growth without love and friendship is superficial. One may have an abundance of gifts, strategies, and resources, but without friendship they are noisy gongs and clanging cymbals.

And it has always been this way. The book of Acts is the story of groups of friends, like the Twelve, Paul and Silas, Barnabas and John Mark, and Silas and Timothy, who traveled and labored together sharing the gospel and establishing communities of faith. The friendships they established along the way are sometimes recorded at the end of various epistles along with warm greetings and holy kisses (Rom 16; 1 Cor 16; Phil 4; Col 4). James Miller puts it all down to friendship:

> Ever since the day of Pentecost this wonderful friendship of Jesus has been spreading wherever the gospel has gone. It has given to the world its Christian homes... it has built hospitals and asylums, and established charitable institutions of all kinds in every place.... The friendship of Jesus, left in the hearts of his apostles, as his legacy to the world, has wrought marvelously; and its ministry and influence will extend until everything unlovely shall cease from earth, and the love of God shall pervade all life.³

The dynamic power of the gospel is love and this is primarily expressed in all of the actions and attitudes that are part and parcel of being friends. Any mission, urban or otherwise, has to include a dimension of friendship. Indeed, it is tempting to rephrase the Great Commission in this way:

> Go therefore and make friends of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:19-20).

In a general sense this is appropriate as Jesus’ disciples are certainly his friends and it does effectively make the point that the mission the church is engaged in is really nothing other than taking the friendship of Jesus to the world.

Dr. Brian Edgar is professor of theological studies at Asbury Theological Seminary. He is an ordained minister in the United Church in Australia where he has pastored several churches.

³ J. R. Miller, Personal Friendships of Jesus (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1897), Loc. 582–587.
By the time I woke up, the marketplace was eight, maybe even nine, feet underwater. Luckily my family and I were living on a slightly higher elevation and were safe for now. I figured my host family would appreciate having some food from the local store on hand—should the storm worsen—so I headed out with my classmate Paul.

On our way back from the store, we saw a group of men at the church. They had fashioned a raft out of a 3’x4’ ½” wooden board, four 4-foot long bamboo poles about 5 or 6 inches in diameter, some rope, and an old tire fashioned into an inner tube. I rushed home to deliver the groceries before returning to the church. When I returned, I was told to hurry up and join the men who had already left, raft in tow.

I was something special: I can swim. Many Filipinos in Metro Manila can’t.

I caught up to the men (including Paul) as they were reaching the edge of a severely flooded street. Some of our church members were stranded in a flooded area. The plan was to swim the raft to them and, if needed, ferry the family back to dry land.

With four of us swimming alongside the raft and, ironically the largest of us atop, we kicked, paddled, and pushed the raft through the 10 feet deep water. The water was a dark brown, bordering on black. Oil coated the water, leftover from all the cars, buses, jeeps, and motorcycles that daily crowded the city streets. The smell of gasoline filled our senses and sat heavy on our skin as we swam through the water. Diapers would brush against my arm sending shivers down my spine at the thought of what else I might be swimming with. I will admit, the cockroaches, both dead and alive were a particular point of disgust for me.

Eventually we found ourselves near the side of the flooded street, and next to a large mess of power and phone lines. It is not uncommon to find power lines tangled and frayed, often dipping down to the height of a man, and it was no different here. Our
journey thus far had been rather slow, as it was just Chris upon the raft rowing with a bamboo pole and four people behind trying to push it through the water. Our legs had tired within the first 15 minutes. Chris stood up slowly and with his large hands grabbed hold of the low hanging power lines, then started to pull. With little care for the potential danger or the damage he could be doing, Chris continued to pull us arm length by arm length down the flooded street. Finally we reached the alleyway down which our church members lived and wedged the raft into the mouth of the inlet.

Men, women, and children crowded the windows of the second floor, some even on their rooftops, as the water had risen above the first story. I had brought my food back home, but Paul had rushed off with the raft, throwing his food onto the watercraft to deal with it later. So as we sat there waiting for the youth pastor, Josh, to swim his way to the doorstep of our church members to check their wellbeing, many eyes saw the food that lay upon our raft. For many, it had been hours since they had eaten, some far longer, perhaps even a day. We began to hear people call out for food. Our hearts began to break. Yes, there were hungry people waiting at home, but here are the hungry, and now homeless, calling out for something to eat. We quickly tore into the various crackers and began to throw handfuls up to outstretched arms. Very quickly it was all gone. And then we sat and waited for Josh as the feeling of helplessness sat heavy on our shoulders. I felt so unfulfilled. My heart was broken for those around me and yet nothing I could do was enough.

And there it was: We were literally unable to do anything more than just be with them. To sit alongside those who were suffering. It was one thing to be there for them, it was quite another to be there on behalf of them; but it was something beautiful to be with them. It was there that I understood what it meant to be with the poor.

Brandon Wong is a California native and a graduate student at Azusa Pacific University in the MATUL program studying how to address urban poverty through a Christian development lens. He currently serves a slum community in Tatalon, Quezon City in the Philippines.
One day a friend in Asia took me to the multi-story public housing estate that he had grown up in. We walked through the crowded dark alleys and the busy streets packed with mobile roadside stalls. It was so long ago that I can’t recall why he took me there. But I do remember that my friend was a hardworking Christian who would not give up hope in the face of adversities. The estate in which he grew up would have housed tens of thousands of people. It was extremely crowded and not a very safe place to live. There were no kitchens or bathrooms in the apartments. Young women could be raped in public toilets, and a small fire could spread easily because of the cramped living conditions. It was forever noisy and there was no such thing as privacy.

This way of urban life was dehumanizing. It was unrelentingly oppressive. This is why I admired my friend, who had such faith in God that he maintained his identity and human dignity despite the harshness of life.

In the last issue of *New Urban World*, I mentioned that the majority of Christians in ancient Rome lived at or below subsistence level, and many lived in crowded apartment blocks. Here I want to add that, while the earliest urban house churches consisted of people from a cross-section of society, most Christians did not hold superior social positions. A small number of them would have enjoyed a level of social standing and economic stability, but they would have to be grownup free men—as opposed to freed or enslaved people—who happened, for example, to have a trade that made enough money. Otherwise, their due in life would be very different. As Dr. Peter Oakes says, “children were subject to harsh control. Women were often stereotyped as flighty and
irresponsible. The attitude to the poor can be seen in legislation that gave preference to the testimony of the wealthy, as the poor could not be trusted because their poverty made them open to bribery.\(^2\) This type of social marginalization is not uncommon among the urban poor today, although it manifests itself in different forms.

This understanding of the social location of the audience in imperial Rome may give us fresh insights into Paul's letter to the Romans. Here I want to take a look at what the letter says about identity. Romans 8:14-16 and 29 speak of Christians being God's children and that Christ is the firstborn of this multicultural (Jew-Gentile) family. This is striking because in ancient Rome, divine sonship was ascribed to the emperor.\(^3\) To say that the uneducated women, slaves, and the poor are children of the Creator God would be quite an amazing concept, for it essentially speaks of a status-reversal that they would never have imagined.

Indeed, the identity of the poor and oppressed is no longer defined by their family lineage or socioeconomic background—which would have been the case both in the ancient world and in many cultures today. Rather, Paul tells his audience that they are God's children by virtue of Christ's atoning death and the Spirit's leading (Rom 8:3-4, 14). I think the Spirit-inspired Abba cry in Romans 8:15 might have originated from Jesus' cry to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane in Mark 14:36,\(^4\) which is the only place in the Four Gospels that the word Abba (an Aramaic term) is used. Just as Jesus cried to the Father in his time of need, the Spirit helps Christ-followers as they face economic hardships and social injustices in imperial Rome. Through this they develop an intimate relationship with God, and the inspiration of the Spirit is the mark of their identity as God's children.

But just in case we think of this relationship in terms of an individualistic mindset, let us note that Romans 8:14-16 and 29 are about a family of God, with Christ as the firstborn. God's project of redemption is about the restoration of humankind through

\(^3\) Caesar was often portrayed on Roman coins as the "son of the deified."
\(^4\) I am indebted to Professor Sean Winter for this insight.
the formation of a new humanity in Christ. Being children of God means joining a new community—God’s family—where the poor can enjoy full membership with equal status as everyone else, and, in this process, their human identity is renewed and an intimate relationship with God is a reality. I believe that this gathering of a renewed humanity is in fact the mission of God.

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28).

For discussion

- How can we embody this identity-forming gospel among the poor?
- What are the obstacles to the creation of Jesus-communities in our urban neighbourhoods, and how do we overcome them?

Siu Fung Wu is passionate about the Bible and justice for those living in poverty. He was an Education Officer at World Vision Australia for almost seven years and is now completing a research degree on the theology of suffering.
From an ecologically-minded perspective, the idea that humans are responsible for the environment is pervasive and entrenched. After all, evidence continues to mount that we are primarily responsible for climate change and other environmental catastrophes. When trying to educate others about human participation in this mess—and how we can help alleviate it—we often ask the question: “Aren’t we responsible for the environment?” But the more we hear about human responsibility for the environment, the more we overlook a potential blind spot. Or, to use another metaphor, responsibility can be like a mirage that tricks us into perceiving something on the horizon that is not really there. Within the “responsibility mirage,” we lose the true horizon we need to move forward, thereby confusing human vocation upon the earth with exercising human control over the planet.

The slogan, “human responsibility for the environment” makes us feel empowered to solve problems. But, we contend that this slogan can actually perpetuate the central problem of the environmental crisis: human power. Taken alone, the slogan guides us right past what we most need to rediscover: self-limitation.

We can be responsible for or to something. For example, an infant’s parent is responsible for the child, who needs the parent for touch, food, and nurturing. The parent of an 18-year-old is responsible to the grown child, who no longer directly depends upon the parent for survival. Both parent-child relationships involve care and nurturing, but the way of being responsible is relative to the limits of relationships. Given this distinction, we can ask, what kind of relationship does humanity have with the environment? Does it make sense to speak of humanity as responsible for or to it?

Biblical wisdom reminds us that the true horizon for discerning our relationship with creation is God’s relationship with all creatures of the earth: “The earth is the Lord’s
and all that is in it” (Ps 24:1). Like a small child with a loving parent, all creation—including us—depend and rely upon God. Within this biblical framework, we overhear the truth which dispels the mirage and shows a true horizon: (a) only God is responsible for creation; (b) responsibility is the “ability to give a response”; (c) all creatures are called to give a response to God, and in this sense are equally able to give an adequate response to God’s expression in nature; and (d) we get responsibility wrong by confusing our responsibility to God with God’s responsibility for creation.

There is an old gospel spiritual that goes, “He’s got the whole world in his hands.” But the dominant take on human responsibility today flips the subject: “We’ve got the whole world in our hands.” With this tune, we no longer hear and speak the truth about ourselves and our place in the world. By contrast, the old tune tells us how we fit in God’s world as caring image-bearers. This sets the frame for us—along with the whole “community of creation”—to be response-able to God. The real issue is not between action and passivity, but rather which human action fits with our place within creation as the bearers of the Spirit playing their part in the community of life.

Notice that when we reframe response-ability within the biblical narrative of creation, the focus is neither on us nor on our managerial prowess. In fact, the spotlight is never just on humanity (adam), nor on the earth (adamah). The focus is on the covenant that God makes with humanity and the earth. God not only makes heaven and earth, but God remains in a free and loving relationship with creation. The created cosmos is good, and because God loves it so much (John 3:16), it is destined to remain in God’s hands.

The environmental crisis still remains very much the work of our hands. Yet, the way forward does not lie in ‘powering up’ and escalating our impact on the world but rather in recalibrating it. It depends on emptying ourselves and depending upon the availability of a different kind of power—the power of God (Phil 2:5ff; Rom 1:16). The ability to do so has to do with the recovery of response-ability, or being able to respond to the call of another.
Response-ability is not a checklist of “50 Ways to Save the Planet.” Recovering response-ability is fundamentally a matter of repentance. The Creator does not call us to be responsible for the environment. The Creator calls human beings to be responsible: to care for creation as our response to being created through and living by the word, as God’s image-bearers within God’s covenant with the whole community of creation. Meanwhile, the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.

Sam Ewell is a U.S. national and permanent resident of Brazil, where he lived from 2003-2010 with his wife Rosalee and children James, Isabella, and Katharine. The Ewells currently reside in Birmingham, U.K., where Sam is doing doctoral research on Ivan Illich and Christian discipleship.

Claudio Oliver is an urban farmer, community enthusiast, unschooler, anarchist, pastor, and teacher. He teaches environmental science at a local university and is part of the Inspired Individual Initiative with Tearfund. Claudio has been married to Katia for 28 years and is the father of Giovana.
A couple of years ago I had an interesting conversation with Jorge, a taxi driver in the urban slum where I live in the outskirts of Mexico City. He surmised, “You know, what you guys are trying to do is very noble. But given all the injustice, corruption, and poverty that we’re up against, there’s not much that will change. Another bloody revolution like the one we had in 1910 won’t deliver the goods. It would simply exchange the people governing us. And most likely they would be even worse than the ones we have now. I guess all we can do is to bear life and survive the best we can, because real change will never occur here.”

There are elements in every worldview or culture that are not for life or for the poor. As a result, many slum-dwellers live by cultural narratives and storylines that mar their identity and keep them from pursuing better lives; narratives, no doubt, that are constantly reinforced by the powers that be. Overwhelmed and disempowered by the stresses of life in an urban slum, and marked by despair, hopelessness, resignation, and fatalism, the identity and vocation of the poor becomes marred as they’re entangled in a web of lies and convince themselves they can’t make a difference—many don’t even try. On the opposite end of the societal spectrum, selfishness, love of power, and feelings of ordained privilege express themselves in god-complexes among the elites. Envisioning a better and more equitable human future, therefore, is hard work for

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1 Another story exemplifies this tenet: Maria, a former neighbor of mine, who was sold by her father to a business man at the age of 14 to settle a personal debt and only was able to flee from her tormentor nine years later, often told my wife and I this: “Since I’m not intelligent and have no education and talents, I can’t do much to advance in life. I am nobody here. Only the politicians and business people in my city can change things. But they obviously don’t want to. So, I guess, the kind of life I’m currently living is the life I have to accept. Apart from surviving there’s not much else I can do. So why hope for a better future when I will be disappointed anyway?”
both poor people and non-poor people. The act of getting the poor to believe in the possibility of a better future is a major transformational frontier.\(^2\) The act of getting the non-poor to participate in this venture is an even greater transformational frontier. Nonetheless, this is what it will take to bring about sustainable, long-term change in cities. Change that visibly and positively affects the circumstances of individuals, communities, systems and even the cultures that shape a particular city.

Ivan Illich, the philosopher and social theorist once was asked, “What is the most revolutionary way to change society: Is it violent revolution or gradual reform?” He gave a careful but very insightful answer: “Neither. If you want to change society, then you must tell an alternative story.”\(^3\)

Flawed worldviews and cultural narratives, then, can be key obstacles to positive change, implying that worldview transformation must often play a central role in poverty alleviation efforts. In fact, in some cases people’s worldviews are so distorted by the web of lies that entangles them that it is difficult to bring about any progress at all until the people undergo a major psycho-spiritual paradigm shift. For without restoring their psychological and spiritual wellbeing, transformation of any kind is not sustainable. When a person does not or cannot work through pain and trauma, the social consequences, including apathy, isolation, aggression, and violence, affect not only that person, but an entire community. Unprocessed traumas, grief, and other wounds explain much of the lack of involvement of poor people in their own development. Indeed, many development projects, despite best intentions, go nowhere, because people are still burdened by their unprocessed pain, losses, and disillusion.\(^4\) Access to spiritual and emotional power, then, is as important to urban slum dwellers as social and political power. People need to be liberated from those things that strangle their emotional, spiritual, and mental life. They need psycho-spiritual recovery to improve their own mental and physical health.\(^5\)

\(^4\) Martha Cabrera, *Living and Surviving in a Multiply Wounded Country* (Nicaragua: Centro, Ecumenico Antonio Valdevieso, [no date]).
\(^5\) Ibid.
This has huge implications for the design of development processes, particularly since oppressive and exploitative systems, which perpetuate poverty, survive not only because of the strength of their institutions or because they can use coercive force, but by the spreading of their faith, by propagating falsehood. Many common people believe the falsehood and therefore allow themselves to be exploited.\(^6\) In other words, if the Mexican poor cannot change the powers that be, their only option is to change themselves! First, they have to be set free from mental or ideological slavery. They have to stop believing that only a benevolent patron or ambitious strongman can lead them out of poverty. They have to cease putting their hopes in self-serving populist political movements or corrupt party structures, which perpetuate the mental framework that ultimately they are dependent on political strongmen for their betterment. Since poor people in Mexico are held in slavery by faith in this falsehood, the truth alone can set them free. Their salvation lies in adopting a worldview that will empower them to take responsibility for their own development.

It follows, that the ultimate answers to poverty alleviation lie beyond traditional responses like job training, education, housing, public health, or urban planning, even though these are crucial. The poor must come to believe in themselves and in God—not in us, not in our development aid, not in government programs. If they believe we are the true instruments of transformational change, then we have failed to create mental sustainability. Instead, we have created dependency, deepened their poverty, and are perpetuating the web of lies.\(^7\)

I sense this is what Jesus came to do in his earthly life, during a time when the centers of power had been taken over by corrupt vested interests that showed no interest in changing the status quo. So he began a reform movement, asking people, whether rich or poor, to repent; to change how they thought about God, the nature of reality, their purpose and role on earth. He then went on to do the following four things: a) uncover the lies of the corrupt religious, political, and economic systems of his time, while prophetically confronting those who perpetuated them; b) practically

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serve the poor and marginalized, while proclaiming the hope-filled message that God's kingdom was already at hand; c) invite people to become his disciples, while creating an alternative social structure—the *ecclesia*—where they could belong and practice the truths of God's kingdom; and finally d) organize a powerful cross-bearing people.

Jean-Luc Krieg is executive director of Mexico City-based ConeXión Mosaico, an umbrella for three distinct organizations that synergistically pursue holistic transformational change in urban poor areas. Krieg has traveled to close to 50 countries and enjoys bridging worlds. He is married to Shabrae and they have one son.
The East End Neighborhood of Lexington is rich in African American history and culture. The neighborhood is adjacent to downtown and is home to about 4,000 residents. At the end of the American Civil War, this place became home to slaves freed by the Emancipation Proclamation and developed into a community of prominent African Americans for many years to follow. Thoroughbred horse racing in Kentucky traces its roots back to the East End where the first nationally acclaimed African American jockeys raced. Offices, businesses, and entertainment venues that served the Black community were located in the heart of the East End. In the mid-1960s, as with many other North American inner cities, this area witnessed rapid decline and disinvestment. Now the East End is home to a diverse, but largely poor population. Alongside a rich history and signs of redevelopment, struggle and poverty persist. Many of Lexington’s residents identify the East End with homelessness, drugs, and crime. This perception further hinders a true rendering of this place – a beautiful and dignified neighborhood loved by God.
Top: A place to foster reconciliation to God, one another, and the land.
Bottom left: In our backyard we invite neighbors to grow food.
Bottom right: The farm is home to large vegetable beds, more than 20 fruit trees, two bee hives, three ducks, twelve chickens, and several varieties of blackberries and raspberries.
Top: Community gardens provide opportunities for relationship building and healthy food in a neighborhood that has been designated a “food desert.”
Bottom: Kids join in to paint the fence of a new urban farm we established in the lot next to our home.
Top: Signs of a rich religious heritage are everywhere.
Bottom left: Musicians in the East End continue to pass on the sounds of lament and liberation through Gospel songs.
Bottom right: Empty lots dot the neighborhood.
Top: Front porches are a place to gather.
Bottom: Music still generates a remarkable sense of joy and pride in the community.
Top: Ms. D at our kitchen table enjoying salad grown just feet away in our backyard.
Bottom: Kids make use of an empty lot.
Top: African heritage is remembered and celebrated with a drumming performance at the historic Lyric Theatre.

Middle: Neighbors enjoy a free concert in our neighborhood park.

Bottom left: Neglected and decaying buildings.

Right: Our agrarian and equestrian heritage is cultivated by community groups.
Geoff and Sherry Maddock make their home in the East End of Lexington along with their nine-year-old son Isaac. Sherry (originally from Atlanta, Georgia) and Geoff (originally from Melbourne, Australia) are delighted to be caught up in the slow work of belonging to their home-place in Kentucky. They graduated from Asbury Theological Seminary in 2001 with MA’s in Missiology and are most passionate about neighborhood transformation through urban agriculture.

Top: A hopeful declaration at The Lyric, a recently restored theatre and community center.
Bottom: Harsh winters make life difficult for people without transportation options.
In this excellent book, Sean Benesh uses the phrase “theology on the fly” to describe a theology that is hammered out on the anvil of life and in the trenches. I like that. Theology on the fly describes the process that resulted in much of what we call the New Testament. Paul's epistles to the churches address real issues in real places. Peter, James, John, and the writers of the gospels also wrote to various audiences who lived and worked in the trenches of urban ministry, announcing the good news. This established what we hold today as the Word of God and it is our only rule of faith and practice. The reality is that when Paul heard about a problem or doctrinal issue in one of the churches, a letter was written addressing its specific circumstances. The books of 1 and 2 Corinthians are examples. Paul is addressing multiple issues that the church in Corinth faced. In fact, many of the letters written in the first three centuries of the Christian era represent an ongoing discussion about issues the church was facing at the time. Iranaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian, Ambrose, and Augustine all address doctrinal, moral, and other issues that the church had to come to grips with and even divided over.

But what is the alternative? To hold to a theology that was hammered out in another time and another place, like medieval Europe or North America during the Great Enlightenment? The beauty of the global church is that we have sisters and brothers involved in incarnational ministry in cities around the world, and particularly in the
Majority World, who are doing theology from the ground up, theology on the fly. And it is time for the whole church to hear what is being said today in all contexts.

This theology is what is needed today if we are to be relevant and helpful in the world as it exists. Incarnational ministry is all about relating to the context in which we are called to serve with a gospel of good news that brings light into the darkness in a particular place. Theology is not a set of canned doctrines but the actual belief system of real people worked out in the crucible where God’s revelation intersects human experience. Theology, thus, is most often a “work in progress” (theology on the fly) and never really finished or perfected. We have a great need for theology that has one foot in the New Testament world and the other foot in the context of ministry.

We are confronted with the issues of rapid urbanization and globalization. We can't sit on the sidelines and rely on the theological answers that were worked over the past 2,000 years or in the middle ages, which is where most of our current Protestant theology originated. Even Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli were responding to the real issues that they confronted in their world. Like Paul and Peter, or even the early church fathers, we have to create a comprehensive theology of the city. A theology that works in Hong Kong, Bangkok, Rio de Janeiro, Jakarta, Nairobi, and other places of our world. A theology that works in the favelas, inner city, slums, or squatter neighborhoods. And the conversation must include leaders in each of these settings.

Benesh develops seven perspectives on the city from his professor, Dr. Ron Boyce of Bakke Graduate University. The seven perspectives are: (1) Temporal Perspective, (2) Sacred Perspective, (3) Security Perspective, (4) Economic Perspective, (5) Spatial Perspective, (6) Social Perspective, and (7) Theological Perspective. These perspectives are developed to offer the urban practitioner the opportunity to understand the city on various levels as well as provide different ways of engaging culture.

There are helpful chapters dealing with God’s template for urban living, pilgrims and place, theology and the built environment, pedestrian-oriented church planting, authentic neighborhoods, and a transformed city, as well as several other topics that receive excellent treatment.
This is a thoughtful book worth reading. It is a primer on the issues we face today. Reflecting on the issues raised will help all involved in urban ministry to see the task more clearly and be able to address the real needs that are increasingly found in the most desperate places on earth.
The younger generation, those in their teens and 20s, really do believe that they can change the world, and many of them are doing just that. Whether it's the girl who goes to Uganda and adopts a dozen orphans, the guy who designs threadbare shoes and sells them for enough money to donate a pair to those in poverty in the Global South, or the boy who dribbles a basketball for hours on end to raise money to provide clean water, their stories inspire and are bountiful. In a day of cynicism and despair, what really grabs our attention are stories—real life examples of people making a difference.

Patrick Regan is the founder/director of XLP, a charity in England that works in over sixty schools in the inner city of London. I was hooked on *No Ceiling to Hope* from the opening sentence: “I started the charity XLP after a stabbing in a school over 15 years ago” (13). From its simple beginnings, XLP has now expanded to do work among the poor in half a dozen locations around the globe.

Regan and Hoeksma challenge us to creatively eradicate all forms of suffering and poverty. They accomplish their purpose through the use of true stories arising from their experiences interspersed with data and material from the Bible, statistics, urbanization, and poverty. The chapters are themed around the woes of the inner city and how change is occurring. We read of gangs, drugs, children, the homeless, the plight of the poor, violence, ministry to Pakistani Muslims in London, advocacy, and the challenges of the schools.

While it is important to work together for the peace and prosperity of the city, utilizing governmental resources, social programs, businesses, non-profit groups, and
community organizations, it is the church that is “uniquely positioned to deliver things other organizations can’t. The church is made up of millions and millions of people worldwide, with congregations placed all over the globe” (22).

Regan understands asset-based community development, the need to move quickly beyond relief into development. He knows that the solution to a community’s problems means working with the community rather than doing things for the people or to the people. His ministry, to use the cliché, seeks to give a handup rather than a handout.

Chapter 10, “Hope in Politics,” recounts Regan’s invitations to address others about the poor and the situations in the schools. From a reluctant speaker feeling he had little to offer, he describes the many opportunities that have come his way and how he has been able to widen his sphere of influence for growing the kingdom of God. His meetings with government ministers and members of Parliament are proof that God will use those who make themselves available and who care for him and his Creation.

If you have a heart for urban ministry, No Ceiling to Hope is a book you must read. It is inspiring, challenging, and, as Danielle Strickland says, “An amazing hopeful manifesto for change.”
There is a lot about Campolo and Claiborne’s *Red Letter Revolution* that I love and appreciate. I recently went through the book with a small group of students at the college where I teach. What I appreciated most is the fact that these are two guys from two different eras who are both choosing to live out the Red Letters of Jesus and do so more faithfully each day—but in different ways! And they don’t simply just try to sweep the differences under the rug, but they embrace the differences, celebrate them and speak openly, honestly, and without judgment about how the other has chosen to do so.

When Tony addresses the stark contrast between, for example, living like Shane does in the Simple Way Community, or as he does (out a ways from the inner city, in a nice home with his 401k retirement fund) he admits that he wrestles with things and is not perfect: “I’m not as unfaithful today as I was yesterday” (15). I think it’s equally as notable to hear Shane say that though he has made different choices, he would not have taken the risks he has in forming the Simple Way and living in community had it not been for the things Tony taught him and challenged him; and instead of judging others who don’t live in radical community like he does, he is concerned with the “log in his own eye” (16-17). Shane and Tony give a lot of grace to all of us on this journey of trying to figure out the words of Jesus and how to live them out today.

My students often want a 3x5 notecard with all of life’s answers written on it. Campolo and Claiborne know that isn’t possible, so they explore the words of Jesus with freedom of expression and appreciation for various strengths, giftedness, personalities, etc. They argue in *Red Letter Revolution* that the answers to life’s questions are in the
words of Christ, but it’s a mess trying to live it out faithfully. And that’s okay.

The conversation format of *Red Letter Revolution* is really refreshing and engaging as each author takes on the various topics included under the three sections: Red Letter Theology, Red Letter Living, and Red Letter World. They have a conversation about each topic and the reader gets to kind of hang out and listen to two really brilliant, uniquely inspiring guys talk about how they, and others before them, live out the words of Jesus. It truly is a privilege to be sitting in on this conversation.

Recently, the students in my small group also had a unique opportunity to meet with Tony for about an hour to talk about the book and it was such a personal highlight for me and them. When I was a young girl, I watched a film series that Tony had done that told the very stories which motivated me to live a life of mission work and missiological education. Getting to meet him some 30 years later and tell him that and listen to him tell my students about living out the words of Jesus was an enthralling, thrilling moment. He repeated from the book to these future church leaders that if they are going to merely follow church tradition, cultural interpretation of Scripture, or evangelicalism—as it now stands—more than they follow the words of Jesus, all hope is lost; however, if they would focus on Jesus and live out his words, they could change the world.

Needless to say—that’s exactly the kind of message you get excited about and the kind of message readers of *New Urban World* are empowered by as they share the love and compassion of Christ. *Red Letter Revolution* is a bold, fantastic, refreshing book I highly recommend here to urban practitioners, by two guys who are making a huge difference in the lives of many and who are the real deal.
The primary purpose of this book is to provide an orientation to God’s mission in the world for potential participants in it, such as college or seminary students who have signed up for an introductory course in mission. As someone currently engaged in designing such a course, I read River of God with particular interest! It will certainly serve its target readership well. The first part of the book constructs a framework for the understanding of mission, providing a missional reading of the Bible as a coherent story of God’s mission (the “Introduction” and chapters 3, 4, 5), an historical survey (chapters 6, 7), and an analysis of world Christianity today (chapter 8). Early in the book readers encounter the key ideas of kingdom missiology (holistic mission that integrates evangelism and social action) and incarnational mission (in Ash Barker’s detailed and nuanced account in chapter 2). The value of anthropology for the practice of mission is argued and illustrated (chapters 9, 10) and mission strategy is discussed (chapter 11). The remainder of the book deals with specific aspects of contemporary mission such as the challenge of cities, and in particular the urban poor (chapters 12, 13), Christian-Muslim engagement (chapter 14), short-term missions (chapter 15), and the continuing task of Bible translation for minority languages (chapter 16). A realistic and practical account of stress in cross-cultural mission (chapter 17) is a valuable contribution, and the book concludes with a wide-ranging look towards the future of mission, in which it is hoped many of the readers of the book will participate (chapter 18). Throughout the book,
the theoretical exposition is grounded in practical engagement, and readers will be enriched, challenged, and inspired by the experiences of the contributors in a range of real mission contexts.

Editors Doug Priest and Stephen Burris, together with collaborator Kendi Howells Douglas, supply eight of the 18 chapters themselves, and it is they who articulate most explicitly the concerns for holistic mission and the urban poor. As is further demonstrated in the contributions from Ash Barker (“Enfleshing Hope”) and Linda Whitmer (“Urban Ministry”), those concerns belong together. It is clear for Priest, Burris, and Howells Douglas that this transformational vision is not only a pragmatic response to contemporary realities, but is rooted in an integrated reading of the Bible as a coherent mission story. They acknowledge indebtedness to the missional reading of the Bible developed most comprehensively by Old Testament scholar and mission practitioner Christopher Wright (see especially *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Academic, 2006). Additionally Robert Kurka’s missional reading of Matthew, Luke-Acts, Romans, and Revelation (chapter 4) will open readers’ eyes to the rich mission content of those books that goes far beyond mission imperatives in a few key texts.

As well as its pedagogical value, *River of God* stands as a contribution to a continuing conversation regarding the nature and practice of mission that will be of value to mission practitioners and supporters, pastors, and all followers of Jesus who want to understand mission today. For most of the contributors to this volume, the location of that conversation is the Churches of Christ. There, their advocacy of an integrated kingdom missiology has to take account of a traditional wariness with regard to a “social gospel,” and the case for giving urgent attention to the urban poor represents a change in direction for many whose mission focus had been “unreached peoples.” The issues may not be so sharply drawn in every ecclesial context but many will recognize the tensions and be grateful for this rich resource.
Not long ago we collectively entered our first urban century. Sometime, no one knows exactly when “two anonymous people quietly tipped the balance of human history” (161), and our world became more urban than rural for the first time, and our billionth brother or sister moved or was born into a slum. Our world changed at that moment. How are we as followers of the risen Christ to engage this new urban world?

_Living Mission_ is a rare book. Many publications attempt to describe this world; very few are dedicated to responding to it, seeking to grapple with how we, mostly from the “Christian West,” can be God’s people in this planet of slums.

One response the Spirit has evoked is the raising up of small communities of missionaries that are highly committed and mobile. They have been loosely described as the “new friars,” a phrase that some may not be completely comfortable with, but it does give the gist that in this world God is up to something new and ancient all at the same time.

_Living Mission_ sketches the contours of the five “signs of life” that these groups take seriously in their discipleship—being incarnational, missional, marginal, devotional, and communal. The insights provided are suffused with integrity as Scott Bessenecker cobbled together a motley crew of authors who have found their qualifications for this task, not only from seminaries, but from the streets, lanes, and sewers they call home.

_Living Mission’s_ short length is no indication of the vast experience of its key contributors who have heard, responded, and lived out the call of God over vast
lengths of time and at considerable sacrifice for the sake of the gospel to birth amazing
missional movements—movements that are planting the mustard seed of the kingdom
in the back alleys and sewers in the fetid soil that well over a billion of God’s children
call home.

Contributions from modern-day heroes of the faith like Viv Grigg, John Hayes,
and Ash Barker provide insights, wisdom, and challenges that are meant to shock the
reader into a response.

*Living Mission* also provides essential fodder for discipleship formation, showing
a new way forward, a healthy alternative praxis to what William Willimon describes
as merely preparing ministers for a therapeutic “career helping people adjust to the
dilemmas of affluence.”

*Living Mission* is a great introduction to some deep streams from which we
would all benefit from drinking deeply. As one who likes to keep a few books on the
go, occasionally two collide and complement one another perfectly. Whilst reading
*Living Mission*, I picked up a dog-eared copy of Katherine Boo’s brilliant *Behind
the Beautiful Forevers.* Her novel tells the tale of modern day Mumbai through
the lives, joys, hopes, struggles, and heartaches of those who enable the city to
function—her slum-dwellers. This unexpected companion to *Living Mission* served a
perfect counterpoint; get it and read them together.

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2 Editors’ note: *Beyond the Beautiful Forevers* was reviewed by Shane Anderson in the November 2012
dition of *New Urban World.*
Would you trust a book about money written by a secondhand car salesman? Probably not. But Wayne Kirkland, in writing his book *Just Money*, has drawn from a wealth of experience not only as a car dealer but as a boy growing up in New Zealand and as a Youth With A Mission (YWAM) worker. He writes with a natural flair for making both his biblical and economic learning accessible to a broad readership, creating a book that “wealthy” Christians will find both challenging and useful.

Christian attitudes towards money have varied greatly, ranging from the prosperity doctrine that Tony Campolo critiques in the foreword, through to the contempt of “filthy lucre” held by St Francis’ brethren, who were asked to deposit banknotes on the dung heap with their teeth.

But Kirkland establishes from the beginning of his book that perhaps the most dangerous (and common) of all attitudes towards money amongst Christians is to believe it has no power over us, and to say, “I don’t have a problem with money.” He agrees with Christian authors like Richard Foster, who contends that money has a dark side.

Kirkland highlights how Jesus acknowledged money as a seductive power, and, therefore devoted much of his teaching to addressing how we should deal with it. Jesus made the choice dreadfully clear: either we serve God or we serve Mammon. We cannot do both. Without venturing into fundamentalist territory, Kirkland takes up this uncompromising stance throughout the book and follows through on the
implications for us today, living in an increasingly materialistic culture.

*Just Money* is divided into three sections. The first considers what the Bible has to say on money. The second explores dominant attitudes to money in the West, and finally Kirkland outlines some practical ways to pursue a countercultural vision of shalom. Each section contains pithy chapters on topical subjects like “Consumption” and “Contentment.” At the end of each chapter is a useful set of questions for the individual or small group to reflect upon.

Despite knowing little about economics, I found the chapter on “Capitalism” very accessible. Kirkland provides a balanced view of our economic system, arguing that capitalism has given us some incredible material benefits. However, big “C” Capitalism as an ideology has serious limitations, particularly when we line it up with the biblical vision of shalom. “Capitalism fails to support an ethic beyond that of personal happiness.” In doing so, Kirkland argues, it ultimately devalues people. The seven deadly sins have become “virtues” as our most basic desires fuel the economy. Continual economic growth is both unjust and unsustainable, as it relies on cheap Majority World labour and rapidly depleting resources.

I know we’ve already heard this kind of critique before, but we Christians still need this book to remind us that we live in a Babylon of sorts, and that we should be sustaining a vision of shalom. My only criticism is that Kirkland does not give examples of contemporary communities that are following this vision. Other than that, *Just Money* is an inspiring and insightful book. I would buy another book (and even a car) from this author any day!
This book brilliantly defines our opportunity to give a cup of cold water in Jesus’ name, to help someone in need, as the means by which the kingdom of God is seen on earth. Or, as Moore points out, “Every act of kindness is a parting of someone’s Red Sea” (182). Moore clearly states his purpose: “The premise of this book is that God’s relationship with people is primarily defined as a relationship of grace, and grace should make us better people and make the world a better place” (111).

The reader will find very helpful sections on Getting Grace (chapters 1-9) and Giving Grace (chapters 10-18). I found the chapters “A Grace-Starved Planet” and “Grace in the Trenches” especially challenging. When a child dies of hunger every 15 seconds, human trafficking is a 32-billion-dollar a year industry, and there are more slaves presently than at any other time in history, it isn’t enough to simply discuss grace. Rather, we are called to give grace. We are to be the incarnation of the love, forgiveness, hope, and grace of God in the truly desperate places on earth. When we do so, we bring shalom to hurting people and societies.

We, as urban practitioners, can’t agree more with these statements or their timeliness:

- God doesn’t want us carefully confined behind our church walls in the euphoria of worship.
- He wants us out in the world, determined to bring change to it.
- He wants us to make history, to leave this a better world than we found it, and he wants his children to be known by his kindness.
God’s not waiting for us at the altar. He’s waiting for us to take the altar to the streets (172).

This book is important in the overall discussion about incarnational ministry as it is currently being practiced by urban mission workers all over the globe, regardless of what method is used to model Christ “to the least of these,” as it gives a solid biblical foundation first, followed by a compelling call to action. Our call is to “stand in the gap for those who need us the most, and get our hands dirty the way Jesus dirtied his hands for us” (161), and this is our reasonable response to a God who “got his hands dirty so that we could have our hearts cleaned” (20).

Realizing that it won’t be easy or popular, Moore reminds us that “grace stands up for truth when people don’t want to hear it, and grace stands in the gap for those who don’t have a voice. Grace takes the hit. Grace decides to charge injustice from the frontlines. Grace sometimes says what no one wants to hear and then keeps saying it until everyone has heard it” (141). Moore pointedly reminds us that “we are the answers to the problems we’re most concerned about” (162). This is indeed a call to action.

Grace, resulting in the demonstration of God’s shalom, is what is needed today. Whether that be through the incarnation of God’s love, forgiveness, restoration, or through activities that give a hurting world hope, we can bring change into our world by following the example of Jesus and getting into the trenches and getting our hands dirty.

And we conclude that “in a world of a billion Christians, there should never be a moment on the planet when hurting people feel orphaned by God” (194).
Alex Clare is something of a rising star in the world of popular music these days. Indeed, his gold-certified debut release *The Lateness of the Hour* is quite an entrance into the scene. Born and raised in Southwark London, England, Clare ‘cut his teeth’ on his father’s jazz, blues, and soul albums. While his siblings were indulging themselves in the targetless angst of 90s American grunge and rock, Clare was busy immersing himself in the jungle, garage, and dubstep scene of the U.K. It is quite striking to note that dubstep has deep roots in the urban world: the movement began in 1950s Jamaica and was then imported to the U.K. after an economic downturn in Jamaica. This downturn forced many to emigrate to the U.K., bringing nascent dubstep with them, firmly embedding it in London and other U.K. cities. Throughout *The Lateness of the Hour*, Clare consistently reminds his listener of the musical scenes from which he has come—not least of these is dubstep.

*The Lateness of the Hour* begins with the driving, danceable “Up All Night”—the most upbeat and electrically-charged song on the album. One is reminded of Matisyahu at times, though Clare’s dance-pop gem is quite unique. As this straightforward party anthem draws to a close, it is immediately contrasted by the slow viscosity of “Treading Water.” Here Clare sounds the first note of a theme and variation that he’ll be returning to all night: this song, like others on the album, is about the cycle of broken romantic relationships that is endemic to those sad, awkward years between adolescence and age 30. The minimal electric pulse of “Relax My Beloved” is reminiscent of a low-volt circuit, mixing elements of soul and drum-and-bass before finally devolving into a
final movement fraught with driving, dubstep-esque anguish and sadness over a lost love. The tempo is picked back up in the following song, “Too Close”—a poppy, upbeat breakup song which builds into a moody, bass-heavy chorus. An unexpected highlight of the album is the 70s funk-imbued “Hands Are Clever”—as good a soundtrack as there ever was for summertime swagger and romance. Here Clare most clearly showcases his upbringing on the classics of soul and funk. For the remainder of the album, Clare alternates between moody, minimalistic electronic dance and piano-driven pop ballads—a strange pairing, to be sure, but one that somehow works, due in large part to Clare’s masterful songwriting and ability to carve out his niche in the spaces between genres. In all, *The Lateness of the Hour* is an excellent foray into the world of electronic and pop, and its critical acclaim is indeed well-deserved.

What is most striking about Alex Clare, aside from his songwriting ability, is his faith: though he was raised in what he has called a “very, very secular” home, Clare converted to Orthodox Judaism in the early 2000s and orders his professional and personal life around the tenets of his faith. Indeed, his strict observance of the Jewish Sabbath has cost him a record contract, yet he has not let that stymy his faith nor his success. Clare keeps kosher, studies the Talmud and Tanya, and observes the laws of *shomer negiah*: avoiding touching members of the opposite sex who are not close family or a spouse. Despite the difficulties of maintaining these religious commitments on tour and in the popular music business, Alex Clare’s star will no doubt continue to rise as he heads out on what is sure to be a highly successful American tour that began in April.
Join us in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, for the second International Society for Urban Mission (ISUM) Summit: Signs of Hope in the City. In partnership with Micah Network and the World Evangelical Alliance: Theological Commission, the ISUM Summit seeks to facilitate collaboration between a variety of urban Christians, including Ecumenicals and Evangelicals, Majority and Western world thinkers, activists and leaders, Church movements and development agencies. This interactive summit will include keynotes from Dr. John M. Perkins and Dr. Jayakumar Christian, in addition to hands-on immersion opportunities, working groups and panel discussions. Outcomes from the summit will include published recommendations and calls to action. Save the date: June 28-July 1st, 2014.