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URBAN MISSIONS TRANSFORMATION AND BANGLADESH

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INTRODUCTION

“Almost everyone wishes for the city they live in to be a secure, thriving, wonderful City (Crane 2015, p. 16).” My transformation started from the port city of Chittagong, Bangladesh in 1986 soon after the completion of my secondary examination and later migrated to Dhaka in 2001, the capital city, for employment at Bangladesh Football Federation. Then, I did not have a sense to justify my movement; however, I was impressed by the first great urban novelist Charles Dickens (1812-1870), who portrayed urban life in the Victorian England and Oliver Twist (1837-39) who represents a radical change in Dickens’s themes. The replica of urban development is supported by theology and missiology (Crane 2015, p.11). My aim is to interconnect our city with the context of Crane’s missiological view. Today’s Dhaka is decidedly different than 2001. Now it is one of the largest populous (21 million) cities of the world. Around 13% of total population (163 million) is on its shoulder, which is equal to the people of 8750 villages. Crane (2015) unerringly says the density of population in the urban areas unlock the journey to spread Christianity (p.12).

TRANSFORMATION APPROACHES AND MODELS

Brooks Winnie (2020) says “the most compelling reason for focusing on cities is because that is where the people are” (MBTS-MAIS, W. 1). God needs people. The most common factors influence Bangladeshi people to migrate into city are for the hope of 1) better lifestyle and 2) education. I was born in a village where there had only government primary schools and high schools. Up till now Bangladesh has no university in the village, let alone in the 19th

century. I was concerned of insecurity, draught, instability, advance education, job opportunity, religious freedom, environment safety, etc. Without moving to the city, I could not have religious freedom. Maybe, up to now, I have to worship with gods and goddesses eg. Durgapuja, Saraswati Puja¹ etc. Urban mission could set free one from community pressure. I am one of the best examples of AOB² through their urban ministry.

1. Durga Puja is an annual Hindu festival which admires and pays homage to the Hindu goddess Durga and Saraswati is the goddess of knowledge, music, art, wisdom, and learning.

2. AOB refers to Association of Baptist, one of the 4 major Baptist Denominations of Bangladesh. It is part of ABWE.

CONTENTS

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| 1 | Urban Missions Transformation and Bangladesh
<i>Shankar Shikdar</i> |
| 6 | Urban Poor Mission
<i>Raineer Chu</i> |
| 14 | The Pandemic’s Impact on Urban Churches in China Today
<i>David Lim</i> |
| 20 | Planting in All Seasons: Personal Reflection
<i>TonyVic Tira</i> |
| 25 | Leadership or Servanthood?
<i>Hwa Yung</i> |
| 27 | House Church Planting in Bashkortostan, Russia
<i>Christopher Carr</i> |

Crane (2015) indicates that “Four key theological components are necessary for a theologically sound definition of urban transformation”. And these are: “1) Transformation is the work of God and is in alignment with God’s purposes; 2) Transformation is Gospel-centered; 3) Transformation is Kingdom-oriented; 4) Transformation is holistic (p.19-21).” Presently the population of Dhaka is 21,005,860³ and in 2030 it may reach into 28,076,000. Crane (2015) considers Biblical priority of cities as the divine reward, individual change needs community involvement. Cities are the places where we deliver God’s purpose and the best place to serve the poor, God calls us for the well being of our cities and urban people are related to the wellbeing of cities. It is the best place to welcome and love people around, and we should envisage a transformed city life (P. 22-26).

According to statistics, 50% of total global population was in the city (2006) that will increase to more than 70% in 2030. However, there still has some cities with 80% population. It is our responsibility to innovate approaches and models to keep pace with the changing scenario. Crane (2015) indicates three approaches and models of urban transformation one of which is “Macro-Perspective of Models of Urban Transformation (p. 31).” It shows how the models of urban transformation correspond to the approaches.

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON CITIES IN CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

Dhaka city is one of the largest multinational mega zones where massive traffic moves and stays together. It has an outstanding influence, plenty of population, social and cultural freedom, and theology of innovation. It reminds me of Paul’s missionary journey to Asia Minor⁴ which was based on cities, and even he preached in the most influential cities of Rome (Acts 28:17-30). Paul’s ministry was the continuation of Psalm 48:1-3 where Jesus gets a name for Jerusalem, the city of the great King. However, the cities of Babel, Sodom and Gomorrah had a bad influence on our predecessors. God desires security & praise⁵ through the city (Genesis 11:4). It is God’s plan of redemption for mankind where Abraham is portrayed as yearning for the heavenly city.

God blessed Adam and Eve to fill the earth (Genesis 1:18). And the Bible reminds us of God’s beautiful desire and will of redemption (Revelation 21-21) for His people in the city. The first heaven, and the first

3. Dhaka Population 2020 (World Population View) February 17, 2020: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/dhaka-population/>

4. The cities located on the Anatolian peninsula (modern-day Turkey). Cities of Asia Minor important to the New Testament accounts included Alexandria, Troas, Assos, Ephesus, Miletus, Patara, Smyrna, Pergamum, Sardis, Thyatira, Philadelphia, Laodicea, Colossae, Attalia, Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, and Tarsus (Holman Bible Dictionary).

5. They build a city in order not to be dispersed over the face of the whole earth (it is the security God desires) and they build a tower with its top in the heavens in order to make a name of themselves (it’s the praise).

earth were completely gone. However, we welcomed the Holy City of the New Jerusalem and “now God makes his home with human beings”(Revelation 21:3). Genesis 1:28 says the cultural mandate is an urban mandate. In Matthew 5:14 Jesus told the City of the Mount (metaphor) is the light of the world. His ultimate journey to the great city of Jerusalem is the movement towards urban ministry, because God promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob flourishing cities where they can live as they remember God’s goodness. (Deuteronomy 6:10).

“The urban perspective on characteristics of a good city are: Density, Vibrancy, Diversity, Security, Economic Opportunity, Organic Growth” while the “Biblical Perspective of Characteristics of a Good City are: God-Centeredness, Shalom Social Vision, Kingdom Communities” (Crane 2015, p. 48, 54).

Go, Eliza (2020) exactly states, “We are to bear witness of God’s Kingdom and live out the peace that only comes from Him under His covenant” (MBTS-MAIS, W. 2). The urban perspective and Biblical perspective are not similar in considering a city as a good city. “The urban perspective on characteristics of a good city are: Density, Vibrancy, Diversity, Security, Economic Opportunity, Organic Growth” while the “Biblical Perspective of Characteristics of a Good City are: God-Centeredness, Shalom Social Vision, Kingdom Communities” (Crane 2015, p. 48, 54). The church is God’s Community within all the cities of the world. Based on Biblical framework by Crane (2018), there are 6 implications for the church: “1) Cities are Places of Common Grace, 2) Cities are Filled with People in need of Redemption, 3) Cities are Strategic, 4) Churches as Royal Priesthood, 5) Churches as Prophetic Presence, and 6) Churches as Foretaste are perfectly set” (p. 7-10).

RESPONSE TO THE THEOLOGY AND MISSIOLOGY

Church should reflect godly purposes (Crane 2015, p. 68) through worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry, and mission based on the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40) and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). I think very few churches in Bangladesh care for a deeper root system (Crane 2015, p. 66) through:

- 1) Message of Eternal Life (Jesus Christ) John 3:16;
- 2) Support people (human rights) Matthew 25:35-36,

- 3) Involve Community (learning & development programs) in multicultural and multi-religious society; 4) Awareness of people from different epidemics and pandemic (Yellow fever, Rubella, Dengue, COVID 19 etc.)
- 4) Care for Fellowship with children, family and parents, etc.

I appreciate Khumalo Mpho (2020) when he enlightens us in his words, "Above all, we need to discern the hand of God about where He wants us to be and how He wants us to roll out our presence and programs in the city" (MBTS-MAIS W.3). In Bangladesh, it is thorny to have a vision let alone strategy and action. We experience systematic and unsystematic oppression by the dominant groups. Power is an intrinsic characteristic (eternal power and divine nature) of God (Romans 1:20). Theology and missiology knowledge teaches us to obey the great commission and the great commandment. It is to be remembered that 1) Church is the approved agent of the Words of God and holds authorization to carry out the gospel of Christ, and 2) Church is the Judicial Authority of God. It is the lawful assembly to accept the body and blood of Christ in remembrance of Him and to take His good news. Thus, the church should utilize power to preserve, teach and preach what Jesus says on the above. According to Crane, the Godly Systems are:

- 1) Spiritual relationship with God (Deut 6:4-6, 14-16),
- 2) Politics of Justice (Deut 6:6-9, 17-19)
- 3) Economics of Stewardship (Deut 6:10-12, 20-25).

There has no exception of theological task, training and education (Crane 2015, p. 79) and missiological understanding to implement the Godly systems in the city.

Crane (2015) indicates, "The canopy ecosystem model addresses the elements of a good city with which the Church must be engaged. The model begins with a solid, God-centered vision grounded in biblical theology and missiology. The vision is one that prayerfully hopes for shalom in the city. A city marked by shalom is one that is just, secure, diverse, and provides opportunities for livelihood and growth" (p.163). We need Shalom that can give us a peaceful urban life. Teh (2018) exactly states that it is balanced with work, family and private life (work-life balance).

THE PRESENCE OF INCARNATION IN THE URBAN CHURCH

Urbanization is the output of industrialization. It's an intersection of multi-cultural people that carry the norms of the society. However, there has some significance apart from the rural areas. The Church is not to change the culture but to change the heart of human beings who changes the culture. Crane

(2015) argues about the presence of incarnation for transformation (p. 83). However, I think, the urban church is anyhow dependent on the groups or individuals for social change. To have an ideal transformation, the urban church works as a canopy ecosystem (p. 88). In Bangladesh there have been many examples of "Guest (urban) Churches"⁶. Overnight they start the church with small groups, chase people with a view to increase in numbers, after some time they become tired and finally close down. They take this attempt often top down through community leaders or bottom up approaches by selling heads of slums people. They even renew or restart the church in another city, with another name, with another group of people. This process can also be called Church Business.⁷ It does not have the presence of incarnation in the church. I believe, the urban church should ideally 1) bring peace (shalom) for all, 2) bring community engagement (bridging) to people, 3) develop relationship (urban expression), and 4) serve as pioneer models (distinct community of Christ) of the society (p. 96).

Shin, Julia Seongae (2020) positively expresses, "Regarding the truths of the gospel, we need to be firm about the constant values (MBTS-MAIS W. 4)." I am an immigrant at my own church (Dhaka) from my home town (Chittagong). I see some churches here in Dhaka having a rubber stamp management committee, pastors and evangelists do not have any voice. They are led by autocrat(s). On the contrary, there are also many small churches around the cities, which do not have minimum facilities, but doing wonderful work in the urban community. It means that the ability of the gospel does not depend on the wealth and power but to the faithfulness (incarnational presence) of God. To make disciples of urban dwellers the church should ensure missional posture (p. 96-96) through 1) reaching out to them with love and peace (shalom); 2) to connect the community people and slum dwellers (bridge); 3) to establish the community with a relationship (urban expression); and 4) follow the uniqueness of each community (distinctness of the local culture).

ROLE OF MINISTRIES AND ORGANIZATION

Christ himself said, "Let your light shine before men, so they see our good works and praise your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). Ortiz (2003) noted the prediction of Rafael Salas that by the end of the 20th century the world would experience radical and overwhelming change with the majority of people living in urban centers, primarily in the cities of Asia, Africa and Latin America (Ortiz, p. 43)⁸. However, up till now "The

6. Guest Urban Church refers here as an allegory of a church for personal benefit, temporary advantage etc.

7. Church Business refers here as profit making enterprise in the name of the church of God.

8. Themelios, An international Journal for Pastors and Students of Theological and Religious Studies, The Gospel Coalition, Volume 28, Issue 2 (Spring, 2003)

rapid urbanization in Asia and Latin America has found the Church there unprepared” (Stuart Murray, *City Vision: A Biblical View*, 62).

The Christian organizations in the city are symbolized as orchids in the forest. Just like trees, the churches benefited from the ministries and organizations. Thus cities are in need of organizations that focus on evangelism, discipleship, community service, and leadership development. Thus, these are to be considered as the associate branch of the church that could be a vital way to reach and impact the city dwellers.

Lee David Hong Joo (2020) notifies, “Rather than the expensive program, we need to focus on the people in the city and permeate them. As we live for public good work, we could be multiplied” (MBTS-MAIS W. 5). The Christian organizations in the city are symbolized as orchids in the forest. Just like trees, the churches benefited from the ministries and organizations. Thus cities are in need of organizations that focus on evangelism, discipleship, community service, and leadership development. Thus, these are to be considered as the associate branch of the church that could be a vital way to reach and impact the city dwellers (Crane 2015, p. 100). Tim Keller (2010) emphasizes cities as the 21st century dominant factor and argues that the urban churches should reach out missiological movement with 1) young-adults, 2) most unreached groups, 3) business owners/ traders, and 4) the poor. In my observation, targeted church planting damages the Biblical doctrine. Church is chasing behind rural settings than counting neighborhood people around it. Cities in Bangladesh need to consider about educational institutes, neighbourhood, storefronts, etc.

RECUPERATE THE FUNCTION OF CHURCH

I appreciate the statement of Leong Ruth (2020), “For those who are in need in our church, I do see love in action among the church family” (MBTS-MAIS W.6) Because the Bible is the voice of the voiceless and help for the hopeless, it speaks up about rights, ensures justice and breaks the silence of the poor. Poverty and injustice are very common themes of movies⁹ in the cities of Bangladesh, which people enjoy watching. City people lose their entertainment without this. It does not create any sense of emotion in people’s mind. Because, it has already been adjusted and adopted in

⁹. Movie represents here as the allegory of scenery.

their social norms and culture. Now the urban people consider this as a universal part of the society. Here people cannot think of a city without the poor and the slums. The characteristics of the city dwellers as set by Crane (2016) are almost the same with the poor around us: 1) in need of money, 2) less rooted communities, 3) relying on public transportation and utilities, 4) extremely oppressed, 5) living cost is higher than their income, 6) involve in crime for money 7) less trusted & no collective voice and 8) lack of development (Reader, p.118-19).

Crane (2016) further quoted by Craig L. Blomberg, “Christianity views the poor differently – more positively – than any other religion or worldview” (p.124). I partially differ this in the context of Dhaka, because most of the Christians here are living below the poverty line, even some Christians are also living in those so called slum areas like sheds in the cities. They often have no scope to view the poor differently from the same shoes. Jesus blesses the poor and we see that in the beatitudes¹⁰ of Jesus when He says blessed are those who hunger, weep, hated, excluded, insulted, rejected and much (Luke 6:21-22).

It is a matter of concern that there may have multiple viewpoints; according to Crane (2016) most Christian churches experienced that the poor is one of the important tools of political and criminal game plan. The literacy, technology, communication etc. (p. 122) are the secondary (artificial) reason of urban poor and/or slum dwellers. I agree with Crane while he explains three ways for the church to respond; 1) Mercy- meeting emergency needs; 2) Love- long-term community transformation through community development and incarnational church planting; and 3) Justice- help in changing systems of oppression and injustice through responsible living, public advocacy, identification with the poor (p. 127).

The Church should connect people directly so that everyone could be treated with dignity and love as God does for us. Relief could be a temporary attempt during the time of natural calamities, floods, draughts, earthquakes, COVID19 and much more. Community development is another important attempt for the church that could operate kindergarten, extend small entrepreneurship loans, micro-credit loan, provide health and sanitation services etc. The advocacy program may help the church to penetrate the root cause so that it could be addressed. Many people around the city church are now fighting for food in Bangladesh. The Church can take the initiative on how to give away food to the hungry. But it is risky to approach people directly. The best way is through active engagement with the local neighborhood (Crane 2015, p. 140), and “one way the church can serve the city is by providing opportunities for artistic expressions by the poor and the working class

¹⁰. The Beatitudes are eight blessings recounted by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew. Each is a proverb-like proclamation, without narrative. Four of the blessings also appear in the Sermon on the Plain in the Gospel of Luke, followed by four woes which mirror the blessings (Wikipedia).

communities" (p.133).

ECOLOGY FOR UPHOLDING TRANSFORMATION

Soh, Diana (2020) articulates, "God's way is through humility and attitude of serving everyone. If you want to be the greatest, you would need to be the servant of all" (MBTS-MAIS W. 7). Today's urbanization is an innovative outcome of human being. Transformation happens through the hands of the people, is for the enlightenment of the people, and is for the goodness of the people. Crane says, "Without a change of heart, a change of self, and of being, nothing will change." The urban transformation started in the beginning of the world; however, sporadically it changes its wrapping. It will be ongoing until the 2nd coming of Christ (Crane 2015, p.154). It is a collective effort, not by an individual or an institution. Crane (2015) says, "One church or ministry will not be able to singlehandedly transform the city. Neither will the city be transformed by all the churches tackling one particular issue. This is why the whole Church of the city must collaborate to seek the Shalom of the whole city" (p.150).

Bryan (2016) declares "God has given me a strong calling to participate in his redemptive mission with the young people and families in my city..... God is working through the mentoring relationships to transform lives and transform the neighborhood. There has been a steady stream of humanity that has come through our home since we moved into the neighborhood." ¹¹ To me, transformation is the blessing of God that is visible through innovative outcome of people. Church is one of many particles where we can establish peace, pleasure, certainty and hope for mankind and decentralize those blessings to the urban people. Here the agent may be different; however the destination is the same.

CONCLUSION

Christianity is not only a religion; moreover it is a relationship to our living God. Christianity is not only for Christians. It is for all mankind. Urban transformation should be justified by the approaches and models how it ensures a good city. It needs to identify and address the theological and missiological systems whether churches are without incarnational presence. Urban transformation requires the presence of the spirit of the living God for a thriving ecosystem. In addition, it should take care of poverty and injustice, because more than half of the people of the world are living in urban areas and a great part of them are living below poverty line and suffering injustice. Let's reshape our vocation for bringing healthy churches and ministries to pull out a vital

11. Dr. Bryan McCabe *The Gospel and the Future of Cities: Transforming the Lives of Urban Children and Youth through Asset Building* (October 15/16, 2016 in Quito, Ecuador).

spiritual environment for eternal impact.

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