

## THE CHALLENGE OF THE CITY

**INTRODUCTION** - *A while back I had the opportunity to visit our national museum in Nairobi, Kenya with my children. In one of the displays they had a darkened room whose far wall had a huge model of the continent of Africa that covered the whole wall. At the place I stood were 2 buttons that if you pressed showed you the borders of the countries on the continent, or the second showed you the capital cities of these countries. It was a captivating display that thrilled my children, standing there in the dark, watching these twinkling pin-points of light that looked like stars.*

They vividly reminded me of our African and the paradox they present. Against the backdrop of the black sky of despair and poverty, hunger and disease, vanishing traditions and failing economies, the city lights have become like those pin-points of lights - they are like the night star that drew the magi to their savour; or like the bright flame of a candle that draws a moth to its death.

Our cities are seen as place of great hope and opportunity, but also as places of despair and hardship. To westerners they are not attractive, they are overcrowded and dirty; polluted and pot-holed, unkempt and outdated, our safety standards are suspect & essential services scarce, but to us who live in them, they are alive, vibrant, exciting arenas where the drama of life is played out daily. Compared with the hardships of the rural area they promise the one thing man cannot live with out - hope! The hope of employment, of wealth, of pleasure and entertainment & the hope of a better tomorrow. Empty hope - yes, but hope none-the-less.

Our cities are young and energetic with over 60% of the people under the age of 30; they are also desperate and explosive as the majority of those youth are unemployed or underemployed. A good 60% of our urban population lives in the slum and the gap between the rich and the poor is widening. To survive - crime, prostitution, illicit brewing and drugs are the only occupations available.

Our cities are fast growing. As a continent we already hold one of the worlds fastest growing population at 2.7% with Kenya in the clear lead; but our cities grow twice as fast at 4.3%. The continent is only 30% urbanized now, but wars, land pressure, famine, and unemployment will push that up to over 50% in the next few years and much of that will be in the capital cities. In 1970 there were only 7 cities in Africa with a population of over 1 million people. By the year 2000 AD there will be 95 such cities, no other continent has seen such urban growth.

Our Cities are the focal point of wealth and power, commerce and industry, utilities and services. In the city we have world class supermarkets with international goods; 100 kms out of the city there are only kiosks with empty shelves; the cities have become like leeches that suck out the life of a country, consumes all the resources and concentrates all the wealth at the expense of the rural areas.

Above all our cities are the centres of cultural change, policy making and progressive influence on the whole nation. Its all happening in the city.

I could go on painting this picture but our purpose here is different - it is to answer the question of what unique challenges and needs the African Church faces as it seeks to minister in the city? I wish to begin on a positive note by recalling the prophetic words of Paul in Acts 17 as he too stood in a city, Athens, and spoke in the Areopagus. He said (Vs 24)

***“The God who made the world and every thing in it is the Lord of heaven and earth from one man he made every nation of men; that they should inhabit the whole earth, and he determined the time set for them AND THE EXACT PLACES WHERE THEY SHOULD LIVE .....***

Amazing, the century has seen the migration of many peoples; famine stricken people migrating towards the wealth of the city; displaced refugees into neighbouring countries; entrepreneurs into lands of opportunity; un-reached people groups into gospel reached zones. The movement is not random for Paul assures us that it is God who has determined the time and the place where all peoples should live. Can we believe that the urbanisation of the African continent, for all its hardships, is at the working of the mighty hand of God? And why should God do this? Paul goes on to say (vs. 27)

***“God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him...”***

People are most willing to change and examine their presumed world views; they are most vulnerable and yet most receptive when they have been removed from their comfort zones and are undergoing change. Yes the cities are desperate, but they are also ripe for harvest.

- Out of the poverty, unemployment and disease - men will seek God.
- Out of the mass migration of the landless poor - men will seek God
- Out of the displacement of refugees from war torn zones - men will seek God.

God's desire is not that the city should remain the candle flame of death, but that it should be the shining star of hope and salvation. That is why he has placed us in the city. His strategy is not new. Note that Jesus most significant ministry, & especially His death, were in the city; the church was born in a city; Paul's missionary strategy was to cities; the world will end in a city; and in these last days God is moving the end's of the earth into the city.

But the city is also an immense challenge for the church!

## 1. The Need For Visionary Leadership

We are all familiar with Jonah the prophet.

*The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amittai "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it..." But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish ..... Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a 2nd time "Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you."*

2 words sum up Jonah's ministry to the city - He was a "reluctant prophet" to the city; he went grudgingly.

Several years ago Daystar conducted a on the pastors who shepherd Nairobi Churches. A surprising 80% of the pastors surveyed reported that they do not like or understand the city. They would rather go back to the rural areas and pastor there! Only 8% said they felt they had enough training to deal with the city; 92% desired more training. Like Jonah many of these pastors are reluctant prophets to the city. Much of Africa's Church leadership is drawn from the rural area, our best missionary efforts are in the rural areas and all our best methods and models are rural models.

In the city one is defined by their job, education, entrepreneurship and purchasing power. The Church does not understand such language and insists of talking the village "language of relationships". But in the city relationships are broken down; transient and expendable. Few understand loyalty and covenant anymore, most understand relationships only in the language of commerce - "what's the profit in it for me?" For this reason many see the Church only in the light of nostalgia - as a reminder of what used to be in the village but not relevant to everyday life! From Monday - Saturday the Church does not feature in the average life of the city dweller.

I do not, indeed I cannot, presume to sit in judgement over my brother in ministry, but turn in your bibles with me to Jer 3:15 and see the type of shepherds God has promised His people in the latter days.

*"I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding."*

I call these the "Shepherds of Issachar" for they are shepherds first and foremost, but they also display the quality of the men of Issachar of whom it is said in 1 Chron. 12:32 - "*the men of Issachar understood the times and knew what Israel should do...*" Men of knowledge and understanding who understand the times and know what the Church should do.

This is the first challenge - where are these men, who will train them, teach them, mentor them. The first challenge for the African church in the city is the challenge to develop and be led by visionary leadership. For too long in Kenya, the leadership of the church has been drawn from the ranks of those who could not make it into "more professional studies". Is it any wonder then that our churches are so poorly led, and are so far behind the world in understanding leadership principles? Our Theological institutions set our standards here by their own admission policies, and in a real sense graduate after training a legacy of leaders who will be a blessing or a hindrance for many generations to come.

## 2. The Need For Community

The 2nd great need is that of developing community in the city. In the Village we knew something about community, and the fact that they were often organised around strong bonds of kinship relationships. This network of relationships secured one's location in society ensuring that everyone knew their place, role and unique contribution to the welfare of the whole. Personal worth and identity draw from this.

Not so in the city. Urbanisation greatly weakens such relational bonds. It weakens them by giving you many alternative relationships, almost all of which are interested in only one dimension of your life - workmates, neighbours, clan mates, casual friends, church friends, etc. I am a different person to each group because each only sees one dimension of my life. My life is fragmented and compartmentalised. I am saturated with hundreds of such relationships but 99% of them are superficial acquaintances only.

My faith is also fragmented into my professional and private life. Belief is compartmentalised into my private sphere and therefore becomes irrelevant to the greater part and challenge of my life. My Christian relationships become one of many choices most of which are superficial. I have little sense of loyalty because most relationships are transient since I change jobs and neighbourhoods and Churches frequently.

I furthermore take on the incipient urban philosophy of commercialism and only maintain those social contacts that profit me; only attend those Churches that bless me.

In the midst of such a milieu, where people are socially saturated and busy, do not understand loyalty anymore but shop around for Christian relationships and Churches, looking for those that thrill them most - WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE THE COMMUNITY OF SAINTS AND THE FAMILY OF GOD? Can there even be such a thing as community in the city? How do you shepherd a church of 1,000 harassed people who draw from all over the city? How do I ensure the elders remain shepherds and do not just become decision makers? How do I help the members care for one another, encourage each other, pray for one another, bear each other's burdens, love each other, etc. Most Churches I see have given up this struggle and gone to one of 2 extremes either

- (i) through their practices, organisation and decisions choosing to remain small, exclusive and unwelcoming so as to maintain a sense of community with the loyal few; or
- (ii) abandoning all sense of community, marketing the church like a commodity and welcoming in the masses that flock to them.

But I ask - - WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE THE COMMUNITY OF GOD? Is it a matter of numbers and programmes, or is it a matter of nurture, care and concern.

#### **Acts 2:42 - 47 (Read from Bible)**

As I study the urban church in Jerusalem my suspicion is that the focal point of Christian community was not the large temple court gatherings but the house churches. I suspect that our centralised, time consuming, cost intensive church models around a building, have become the biggest encumbrance of the urban church. We need a fresh vision of what it means to be church and I suspect that it will be around the home. Apart from Paul's concept of the body - no other imagery captures the themes of Christian community as well as the home. Why? Because the home:

- Is a universal phenomena and hence a culturally appropriate physical location in any culture
- It removes the need for cost intensive, centralised buildings and bureaucracies.
- The home has always been the foci for new birth, nurture, discipline, values, loyalty, etc.

- The home symbolises intimate relationships, caring, forgiveness, forbearance and love.
- Finally the home is multigenerational where every member child, teen, adult and has a special locations and contribution to make.

I have come to believe that the city Church needs to change its focal point. That it needs to decentralise into house churches that are empowered to break bread, engage in missions, teach, shepherd, discipline, minister, counsel, hold crusades, disciple and determine the use of their tithe. Only such a model will continue to keep up with the growth of the city and the demands of ministry. Only such a model will indigenously adapt to the changing needs and demands of city life. Only such a model will fill the vision of community that nurtures and cares for each convert & member.

This however, is a major paradigm shift in our model of church and I'm not altogether clear on how it can be made or what its details are, but the real issue here is how do we form and maintain community in the city.

### **3. The Need For Compassion.**

The 3rd great challenge of the City is the challenge for compassion. Let me tell you a modified parable of the good Samaritan.

*The good Samaritan was as usual travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho on his business trip, but these were modern times and he was in an old but reliable car. On the way he met a man who had been carjacked and left for dead by the robbers. Feeling compassion he stopped, bound his wounds and put him in the car intending to take him to the general hospital in Jericho. Further along the road, he met another pedestrian who had been knocked by a hit and run car, lying across the road, bleeding profusely. Again he stopped as this mans body stood the danger of being run over. The man was still barely alive so he put him in the car and went on. Several miles from Jericho he saw some leper children begging by the roadside. He noticed that the eldest was suffering from Kwasakor and that the younger ones looked listless and trancelike - sure signs of severe malnutrition. Once again compassion overtook him and he stopped to give them some coins for food. He continued with his journey but he had not gone far when he saw a new born baby lying by the roadside naked. Stray dogs were already at her and had eaten half the placenta. He stopped alarmed, he could not leave this baby unprotected and yet he knew the mother had already left, possibly a poor woman or a teenage girl who could not keep the baby but did not have the heart to kill it and had left it by the roadside hoping some kind passer-by would see & take it. And so he did, intending to drop it off at the children's home in Jericho.*

*On his way into the city he passed through the slum areas where the homeless lived in carton boxes. His heart sank knowing he was helpless to do anything. When he got to the hospital and children's home they could not assist him as they were already overcrowded. The police too could not help but told him to come the next week and write statements. And so in desperation he took the baby & 2 men home to care for them, but at the gate his wife met and told him that their house was already full as his brother, wife and 7 children had arrived from the rural area looking for a job - the rains had failed once more and they were desperate for help.*

*The next time the good Samaritan went to Jerusalem he flew! As he could not bear to deal with the poor & needy anymore.*

After a little while the good Samaritan was fatigued. The need was too great! We too face the similar question - what is compassion in the face of desperate needs of the City? At the recent Habitat meeting in Istanbul, the UN said there are 600 million people world-wide inadequately housed and over 100 million homeless. Many of these are in the Cities of Africa and their plight is desperate. Here in Nairobi the homeless street children have created ingenious plays to coerce money from motorists - used hypodermic needles, or a fistful of faeces.

What does compassion in the City look like? What can the Church do for the City. No matter how great your sacrifice, it seems to change nothing. No matter how great your own need, or how pressing your resources are you are still wealthy in the eyes of the poor. Living with these sights and matters on your conscience produces a lot of guilt.

Now Christians have traditionally concerned themselves with the ethereal but can the African Church turn a blind eye to the plight of the poor any longer? Much of the poverty in Africa is as a result of the poor management of our God given resources; needless wars, greed and incompetence by our government. Should the Church concern itself only with the souls of men or should it take up a prophetic role and demand transparency, accountability & change? What do we do with the challenge of the Proverbs 31:8,9

***“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly, defend the rights of the poor and needy.”***

More and more as different Christian leaders on the continent of Africa have dwelt on the matter of the future destiny of Africa, the only hope that seems to be on the horizon is that of the church. Only the church in the power of the Spirit can change Africa from a basket case and fulfil the vision and hope that we believe God has for us. But the question is - has the church realised this?

Do they see the challenging work ahead of them? As the church in the city, close to the seats of govt. power, in the place where the destinies of nations are changed, will we lead the way? Can the Church be the very model of good, transparent, accountable, responsible leadership that Africa is crying for? Many thousands on the continent of Africa know that the gospel is true, but they wonder, is it relevant? This challenge the Church can only answer by addressing the question of compassion and change on the continent.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion let me recap on the biggest challenge the Church faces.

- God is moving the peoples of the earth into the city - the world is becoming urban
- The Church was born in a city and will end in a city. But in Africa after 2 centuries of missions the focus has always been rural frontiers and the models are best suited for rural areas.
- Our biggest challenge in Africa then is that we must adapt to the city - we must pray for and develop a new crop of leadership suited for the city, we must also examine and question our stereotyped models of Church and adapt urban strategies and models for the city. The rural models and leadership has been imported into the city is relegating the Church to the fringes of society and might be our undoing as we house ground and time. And thirdly, we must ask the question of what the relevance of the gospel in a world that is desperately in need of God's compassion is.