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Mission and Metropolis: The Church and the City

Evangelicals now face the great challenge of these massive Western cities, filled with populations marked by great diversity in terms of ethnicity, language, worldview, and culture. Thankfully, there are standout examples of faithful church planting and ministry in many of these cities, but the populations remain overwhelmingly secular and unevangelized.

Friday, September 10, 2010

The human future is an urban future. In one of the greatest social shifts of all human history, over half of all living humans now inhabit cities. Driven by population shifts, immigration, and human reproduction, massive new cities are springing up all over the globe. Will the church rise to this challenge?

The answer to that question will largely determine the future of Christian missions. At the same time, this is not the first time that the Christian church has found itself faced with the challenge of the city. A quick look at the New Testament will reveal that first-century Christianity was, by and large, concentrated in the cities of the Roman Empire. These earliest churches were established in cities like Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, Thessalonica, and, of course, both Jerusalem and Rome. The churches established in these strategic cities became the launching pads for missions and church planting.

Similarly, the Reformation of the church in the sixteenth century was an urban movement, emerging in the cities of Switzerland and Germany. The cities were host to the emerging universities of the Middle Ages and to the flowering culture of the Renaissance. The cities were where the Industrial Revolution happened and where churches pioneered new forms of ministry in the great nineteenth-century cities of London, Birmingham, Chicago, and New York.

But now, a new burst of metropolitan growth is transforming the global reality. The current issue of *Foreign Policy*, one of the most influential journals of global news and opinion, features a must-read collection of articles and research that documents this transformation. The Christian church had better pay close attention to this new and exploding global reality.

“The twenty-first century will not be dominated by America or China, Brazil or India, but by the city,” writes Parag Khanna of the New America Foundation. “In an age that appears increasingly unmanageable, cities rather than states are becoming the islands of governance on which the future world order will be built.”

Khanna explains that the energy, as well as the population growth, is shifting from nations to cities, and from the West to the rest of the world. Hundreds of newly-formed and forming cities now dot the global landscape, and some of these are simply massive.

Consider this:

Then there are the megacities, superpopulous urban zones that are worlds unto themselves but that — for now — still punch below their weight class economically: Think Lagos, Manila, or Mexico City. When Tokyo in 1980 became the first metropolitan area to reach a population of 20 million, the figure seemed almost unimaginable. Now we need to get used to the idea of nearly 100 million people clustered around Mumbai or Shanghai. Across India, more than 275 million



people are projected to move into the country's teeming cities over the next two decades, a population nearly equivalent to that of the United States. During a recent trip to Jakarta, a minibus-clogged megalopolis of 24 million, it struck me that many if not most of the residents will never leave their city's expanding perimeter or know much of the outside world beyond the airplanes flying overhead.

The numbers driven by this new wave of urbanization are staggering. Richard Dobbs, director of the McKinsey Global Institute, paints a truly shocking picture of the global future. Fully 70% of all Chinese will live in cities of more than 1 million people by the year 2025. By 2030, China alone will count at least 220 cities with populations exceeding 1 million. At the same time, India will have 68 cities of similar population size. Together, India and China will add over 600 million city dwellers within the next twenty years — about the same populations as if the total populations of the United States and Brazil were added together.

China will have to add at least 40 billion square meters of living space within the next two decades. Traffic jams in India may point to 5-hour daily commutes as the norm. By 2025, China is likely to have 880 million daily commuters in its cities.

The journal points to the Chinese city of Chongqing as a symbol of the new urbanization. In the 1930s, Chongqing was a regional city of some 200,000 inhabitants. The city exploded in growth over the last twenty years, and it now has a population of more than 32 million inhabitants. As Christina Larson reports, the city is growing so fast that it cannot be adequately mapped. "In Chongqing's northern New District today, it is possible to drive for more than half an hour past high-rises of 30 to 50 stories, block upon block, where five years ago there were only fields," she writes.

The interests of *Foreign Policy* lean mainly to international business, governments, and international relations, but Christians reading this fascinating issue of the journal will think immediately of the missiological and evangelistic implications of this mega-shift in human populations.

There is reason for concern. The cities were the strategic platforms for ministry and missions in the first century, but the last century and more has been a time of retreat in terms of Christian impact in many of the world's great cities. The twentieth century was, in terms of Western cities, a period of radical secularization. While Harvard theologian Harvey Cox's 1965 blockbuster *The Secular City* was controversial, its title was not.

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Jump from the cities of the West to places like Africa, China, and India, and you will find even greater challenges, along with far greater populations. How will global Christianity respond to this challenge?

"We are at a global inflection point," asserts *Foreign Policy*. The world's decision makers, political leaders, and titans of business have heard the news. Will the church also hear?

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler.

Parag Khanna, "[Beyond City Limits](#)," *Foreign Policy*, September/October 2010.

Richard Dobbs, "[Megacities](#)," *Foreign Policy*, September/October 2010.

Christina Larson, "[Chicago on the Yangtze](#)," *Foreign Policy*, September/October 2010.

