

A Pastor in the City

Rev. Ingo Dutzmann

The world comes to my doorstep. I know this sounds almost egotistical, but it is true. The world really does come to my doorstep. I am blessed to be the senior pastor of a congregation in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod that is located deep in the heart of a major American city. It is a difficult, challenging, rewarding, and exhilarating experience to be the Lord's metropolitan undershepherd, and it is the only place in which, God-willing, I want to serve out my ministry.

I know. I know. To some of you, this sounds like madness. You may find yourself in agreement with the early nineteenth-century clergyman Caleb Colton who said, "Men, by associating in . . . cities, improve their talents, but impair their virtues; and strengthen their minds, but weaken their morals." Or consider the seventeenth-century poet Abraham Cowley who lamented, "God the first garden made, and Cain the first city."

Yet there have been other voices. The nineteenth-century Scotsman Thomas Guthrie said, "I bless God for cities. They have been as lamps of life along the pathways of humanity and religion. Within them, science has given birth to her noblest discoveries. Behind their walls freedom has fought her noblest battles. They have stood on the surface of the earth like great breakwaters, rolling back or turning aside the swelling tide of oppression. Cities indeed, have been the cradles of human liberty. They have been the active sentries of almost all Church and state reformation."

Early in the Book of Acts, Jesus promised His followers to await the baptismal power of the Holy Spirit before going out to "be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:5, 8). While ministry to cities receives minor mention here, it is instructive to note what actually happens when the first missionary journeys take place. Armed with our Lord's encouragement, the early voyages of St. Paul and his varied entourage took them to the cities made famous by the canonical books that carry their name: Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, Thessalonica, and Rome. While certainly there were ministries in the Galatian countryside, these receive far less mention in the Scriptures. It is the cities

where the seeds of a nascent Christianity sprouted, grew, flourished, and then spread throughout the civilized and uncivilized world.

As the Early Church gained in members and stature, it was in the cities that an enormous Christian vitality emerged. The great cities of Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, Damascus, Byzantium, and Rome became the thriving centers of this faith. Even after the fall of Constantinople in 1453 to the Muslims, it was another city, Moscow, that assumed the mantle of the fifth city of Eastern Orthodoxy.

By the time of the Reformation, it was the cities of Wittenberg, Augsburg, Leipzig, Braunschweig, Hanover, and Dresden, all of which figured prominently in the rise of what was to become the great movement to restore the centrality of the Scripture as the only rule and norm of faith and life. Is it any wonder that in the so-called new world the Lutheran presence became so prominent in New York, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Detroit, Milwaukee, Chicago, and others?

I freely admit that our denomination has not fared well in the city of late, but cities still draw the people of God today for the same reasons that the early apostles were lured to them. In a nutshell, cities are without question the world's economic, political, musical, medical, literary, technological, and artistic hubs. And, most importantly, they are also the hubs of religion.

Where but in a city do Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus regularly get invited to your church by Christian colleagues and friends? Where but in a city church do you find members on welfare worshiping alongside multi-generational millionaires? Where but in a city do you get a small glimpse of what heaven will be like as Asians, Africans, Americans, Australians, and Europeans worship together side-by-side? Where but in a city does even a small congregation have the corporate will, personal talent, and musical resources to lift up vibrant liturgically-based Word and Sacrament worship to its rightful place as the spiritual highlight of the week? Where but in a city do you find students and young professionals ready, willing, and able to joyfully assume the burdens of leadership in large numbers alongside their older colleagues? And where but in a city can you affect future leaders of countries all around the world by introducing them to the Savior of the world?

Permit me to give you a few examples of city ministry that I have not experienced in any non-city setting. I realize that God can and does work miracles wherever He wills, but I truly believe the number and scope of these miracles is directly attributable to the fact that I work and minister in the heart of a city.

For instance, an ex-convict was sent by a prison chaplain to me with the admonition that if Christ was not to be part of his rehabilitation, he'd find himself back behind bars. Happily, he seems determined not to recidivate. An Asian couple felt led to publish and copyright their own Christian pamphlet for distribution by the thousands to a distant land. The leader of a city synagogue regularly attends our worship with his Lutheran wife and child and comments on the interesting

connections between the Hebrew prophecies and New Testament fulfillment. A teenager from a broken home asks me what it takes to be a Lutheran, and in time, he and his mother become convicted followers of Jesus. A recovering homosexual becomes such a dedicated Christian that I find him comforted by The Book of Concord shortly before he dies of medical complications. A member is so taken by the vibrancy of our ministry that she commits herself to an increase of financial stewardship from \$200 per month to over \$2,000 per week. A young musician from a land behind the former Iron Curtain wins a prestigious award for organ performance and is offered a lucrative career in concertizing. Instead, he applies for a music position in our church, because he says that after years of not being allowed to worship, he'd rather serve Christ than his own personal musical ambitions. Is it any wonder that my wife and I feel God is blessing us in ways we could not have dreamed possible just a decade ago?

I'd like to sum up by sharing the contents of a postcard I received from a prominent Japanese businessman with three earned terminal degrees, a man whose twenty-two-year-old daughter I had baptized some months earlier much to his displeasure. To her credit, she had told her father what she intended to do prior to the Baptism. The card read, "Dear Pastor Dutzmann, My daughter was bad. Now she is good. I believe this has something to do with Jesus. I must think about this. Sincerely yours." Yes, I might have gotten this card while serving outside the city but probably not. The truth is that just as St. Paul and the apostles saw the cities as the hub to which people came for a myriad reasons, so too the cities send people out after they become convicted Christians, and they, in turn, with the help of the Holy Spirit turn the world upside-down. Indeed, as a city pastor, the world comes to my doorstep.

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