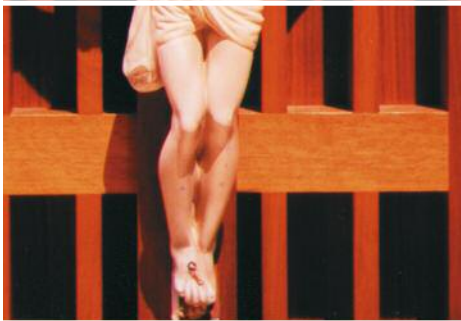
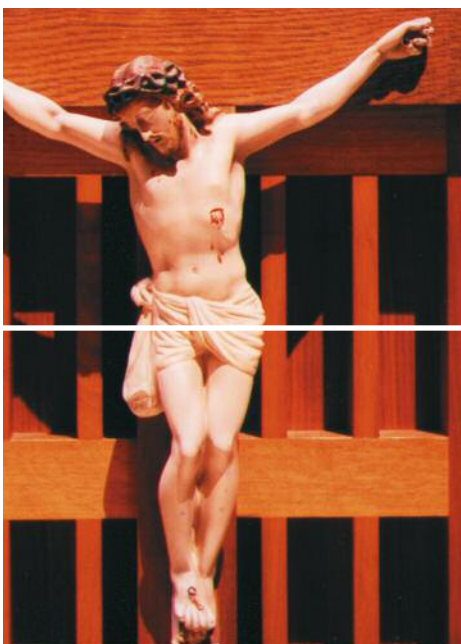


For the

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The Prayer that Jesus Gave - p.6

“Lord, Remember Us in Your Kingdom, and Teach Us to Pray...” - p.8

Prayer: The Voice of Faith - p.10

Urbanology: Reflections on Mission for the City - p.12

In The Field - p.14



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P R E S S

URBAN

Reflections On

By Dr. Detlev Schulz

The basis of the Christian mission in urban areas is the presence of worshipping communities. Congregations, where the Word is preached and the Sacraments are distributed, become the leaven for Christian witness and service to neighbors. The worship life ultimately transgresses and transforms the lives of all those individuals received into such a believing community.

There have been and always will be cities in North America that have rapid growth which at times is startling but today has become a widely accepted reality. However, churches including Lutheran churches, are struggling with these burgeoning cities. Big cities are characterized by religious, ethnic and economic pluralism; lives which are molded by industrialization and new technologies; fluctuating economic conditions; and by the steady influx of people. All these factors are adversely affecting the traditional Christian community in the cities. At an alarming rate Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod congregations are slowly but surely losing their foothold in the inner-cities. In view of this, *urbanology* has become a key phrase in churches and at theological seminaries where plans are now being made to initiate an investigation into the challenges churches face and hopefully to come up with meaningful answers as to how they can be overcome.

Inner-Cities Need Mission

When dealing with inner-city life and its impact on churches, one priority item persists—**urbanization has become one of the great mission challenges of our day.** Urbanology therefore studies core and peripheral issues related to bringing the message of salvation to an inner-city setting, either to where a church already exists or to where a church must be planted. Urbanology is missional, but a further core principle of urbanology is that

it is also ministerial and sacramental. Every mission outreach of the church is structured around the Word and the Sacraments which must be preached and administered through the divinely instituted office of the church. The means of grace are undoubtedly the only means through which the Holy Spirit sustains a church or brings it into being. Urban mission outreach is therefore principle oriented. It may never be blurred by a mere pragmatic mind-set of making effective-



ness and success the ultimate criterion. To ask “what is most effective” or to believe that “nothing succeeds like success” runs the risk of compromising the biblical and divine truths. Instead, “God’s ways are higher than our ways” and they are the only sure guide to the future. So often results of human inquiry are promoted as “principles”. Just because some church has had a positive experience with certain approaches does not mean that they apply to every church every-

where. In effect, we very often substitute the changing word of man for the eternal Word of God.

Building Bridges to People through Love and Worship

The urban environment does not provide the same context as that of villages and small towns. The Christian community needs to find its way into the patterns of life and thought which are characteristic of urban settings. The modern frontier of inner-cities is often multi-ethnicity and poverty. Congregations in the inner-city must reach out and build bridges to people

URBANOLOGY

Mission For The City

who often understand the face of Christ as black and poor. This is not only done through the call to repentance and faith, but it must also include the expression of love because “love goes forth upon earth, among the people and does much good” (Apology IV: 226). Urban mission would be misapplied if not applied at all if it were to walk within a narrow evangelical orbit. Crossing frontiers and barriers implies that the proclamation of the church will have to be made meaningful to the context of those people it administers through the ministry of the Word and the deed. The basis of the Christian mission in urban areas is the presence of worshipping communities. Congregations, where the Word is preached and the Sacraments are distributed, become the leaven for Christian witness and service to neighbors. The worship life ultimately transgresses and transforms the lives of all those individuals received into such a believing community.

Statistically Alone, The City Demands Our Attention

The city of Detroit serves as a good illustration for the serious state of urban Christianity. In the last 50 years Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod congregations in Detroit have seen great changes. In 1947 the Michigan District had 34 congregations and the English District had 12 congregations in the city of Detroit. Now, in 1998 the *Lutheran Annual* lists 25 congregations in the city of Detroit. There are 22 in the Michigan District and three in the English District. Despite a burgeoning city, the congregations are suffering from a rapid decline in baptized members. For example, the current East Detroit circuit of the Michigan District had eight congregations in 1947 with a total membership of 9,642. These congregations peaked in 1968 with 13,124 baptized members. As of the 1997 statistics, these same eight congregations had a total of 2,244 baptized members. A congregation that listed 3,962 baptized members in 1968 closed in

1997. A congregation that listed 497 baptized in 1968 closed in 1979. Once a center of Missouri Synod Lutheranism, the churches in the city of Detroit are seeking new ventures in ministry and outreach to the community. In light of this reality urban mission remains a high priority.

Unmasking The Urban Anguish

A commitment to the city mission finds itself in the midst of opposing “push-pull” forces. One of the forces which upsets the balance of the Christian presence in all major cities is the significant drop in the percentage of members. The above statistics of the city of Detroit are a reflection of what is commonly known as the *urban anguish* associated with a rapid exodus of inner city Christians to suburban areas where a security in life-style of a lasting standard is envisioned. But this *urban anguish* reflects a larger cultural context, that of the overall American society, where the general “moving out mentality” confronts pastors and members at the local level. Very often pastors and members of inner city congregations contribute and promote such a mentality, but surely, they are equally also its victims.

“How Local Is Your Church?”

A paramount question for all congregations living in the inner-cities is, “What sort of a church ought we to be?” One important response to this question is working towards making the church local. Urban mission encourages a greater identification of the church with its neighborhood. Christ’s command, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Romans 13: 9) is a call to resist the temptation of moving out but rather a motivation to stay and reach out. Members and pastors are encouraged to pick up the cross of Christ (Luke 14: 27) and to define statistics and comparisons with “flourishing” churches. To be missional is to remain loyal to Christ’s command by “declaring the praises of him who called you out of darkness” (1 Peter 2: 9), to be a “light” and “salt” to all peo-

ple (Matthew 5:13-16) and “make them come in” (Luke 14: 23). Urbanology is therefore strategic, which means that it is prepared to look into ideas and ways towards cultivating and directing a concentrated outreach of a believing community in its immediate setting. Urban mission promotes existing congregations as outposts and stations from which the treasure of salvation flows and to which those in need may be received. Therefore, despite all the efforts to address urban centers with specialized ministries, the basic significance of local worshipping congregations must not be forgotten. One important sobering fact in successful outreach though remains—a rise in membership from a changing neighborhood does not bring immediate financial gains.

Counteracting The Urban Anguish At Broader and Higher Levels

Adding immensely to this time of instability is the massive inattention to the topic of urban mission on a transparochial level. This means that local congregations are generally left to tackle the problem on their own. But as one pastor of an inner city congregation in Indianapolis despondently declared, “Our church has supported the Synod since 1903, now its her turn to take up our cause”. If inner city duress is not brought about entirely through one’s own fault but results from pressures caused by the overall cultural and sociological mindset of most American people, then urbanology summons all brothers and sisters in Christ at district and synodical level to express their support. Task force teams or inner-city committees of concerned pastors and members should be founded to raise the interest level for urbanology beyond its parochial borders.

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