

**Yates, Christen. *Planting and Growing Urban Churches: From Dream to Reality*. Harvie Conn, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997).**

While I expected this book to primarily address pastors working through the church, I was pleased to see it translates well to laity working through churches or non-profits. Essentially, the book seeks to provide a comprehensive guide to planting and developing urban ministries. As Charles Ringma stresses in his lectures on Urban Anthropology and Mission, Conn sees the necessity to wed social research with mission. If we desire to be effective transformers within the city, we must transpose knowledge into praxis. Conn organizes this book into four parts comprised of essays from various practitioners: 1) research, 2) strategy planning, 3) targeting, 4) samples (or models). Each section ends with a helpful resource list for further research.

## **Part I: Research: Searching for the Right Questions**

Conn introduces this section by describing the history of applied research (research intended for application) within the church. Becoming more prominent during the 60's through the interest in urban studies, applied research grew stronger during the 70's through the church growth movement and the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization. Through the 80's and 90's, a growing global perspective combined with a growing desire for more sophisticated research methods helped encourage urban research. Today, urban church research has grown to include investigation into a city's history, "its demographics, its cultural self-understanding, its politics, its worldview loyalties" (33). Conn points out five needs within the field of urban church research:

1. Research methodologies need refinement;
2. A more balanced urban hermeneutic is needed;
3. Christian scholarship must turn to the issues of urbanism, to the city as a way of life, and to the proper connection between 'religion' and urbanism;
4. Research on a macro-level and micro-level scale must be encouraged in those areas of Africa, Asia, and Latin America where it has often been minimal;
5. For that research to be effective in winning the cities for Christ, it will need to be user-friendly on three levels – that of the theoretician, the strategist, and the practitioner. (33-34)

One of the major factors in the growth or decline of urban churches and ministries results from changes in and characteristics of the context (community setting: population growth or decline, racial transition, neighborhood social class, and the proportion of young children in the area.) (41) Thus, some of the primary ways urban research can help churches and agencies avoid this decline is by providing needed facts, testing ideas and strategies, and

developing new ideas and models. (37) Ethnography, the process of describing a culture from the perspective of those who live within it, is essential in studying the surrounding context of a church or ministry. (47) One helpful example from the book that shows how to translate ethnographic research skills into an urban ministry context is the Caleb Project Research Expeditions. CPRE focuses on studying the targeted population, then evaluating the existing church services to the population and finally strategizing how the church or ministry can be more effective. CPRE identifies four stages for researching the targeted population:

- 1) explorational – getting to know them generally;
- 2) stratification studies – studying race, religion, linguistics, class, political parties, locale, region of origin, stage of migration, education or occupation. Want to know what criteria people themselves use to distinguish themselves rather than use criteria of our own;
- 3) reachedness – determine how the church/parachurch has been reaching them;
- 4) envisioning a church – strategize how the church/parachurch could reach them more effectively. (58-65)

CPRE's research methods are generally informal. Researchers have no prewritten questionnaires, but instead use general lines of questioning through conversation to test and form hypotheses. In order to be more personable, they only take notes after the conversation and then record them systematically in a computer to analyze later. In addition to studying a specific people group, CPRE researchers seek to understand the country (or neighborhood) as well as answer the larger questions of mobilization: Why are we doing this research? What will we do with our findings? How do we plan to achieve our overall objectives?

## **Part 2: Strategy Planning: Searching for the Right Answers**

Conn describes strategic planning as taking the raw materials of research and giving them purpose and direction (69). Strategic planning for Christians should include many firm presuppositions. For example:

- 1) Strategic planning is a human enterprise linked to who God is and who we are (we can't plan in ways that go against Scripture and what God has already laid out as His desires for a just order);
- 2) The limitations of our creaturehood and the myopia of sin can misdirect strategy planning;
- 3) Strategy planning must be God and Christ-centered in focus – understanding that God's glory and purposes are displayed in and through the city. (70-72)

Building upon the last presupposition, Ray Bakke rightly states, "We Christians are the only people on this earth who have the integrated worldview of matter and spirit that enables us to tackle sewer system development and the salvation of souls with equal gusto." (80) Understanding that God has a plan for the physical as well as the spiritual is a necessary first step to strategic planning, along with humility, prudence, faith and prayer.

An important key to strategic planning is understanding the felt-needs of the people with whom you are working so that the response can appropriately address the problem. "By addressing felt needs of city-dwellers," observes Craig Ellison, "we connect with them so that they pay attention. Because we touch them at points of pertinence, our message gains a hearing. Because we have shown caring at the level of temporal need, we are given permission to express caring for their eternal need." (95) Ellison goes on to explain in more detail the different ways we address individual or systematic (corporate) felt-needs, needs which can be spiritual, cognitive, relational, emotional, and physical. He points out four different kinds of responses to these felt-needs: Informational (provide appropriate information); Developmental (provide training and development); Mediational (intervention, advocacy, and referrals to appropriate services); Diaconal (provide direct relief – food, shelter, financial assistance, etc.) (102-103)

Ralph Neighbour provides some more detailed and helpful steps in urban strategic planning including creating a prayer base, doing background research, creating a strategy map, developing a neighborhood analyses, and taking surveys of the population's awareness of what services you provide. Once these steps are completed, the strategy plan often falls into place based on the needs that arise from the background research. (111-122)

### **Part 3: Targeting: Linking Church to Urban Community**

Missiologists, explains Conn, are beginning to look as closely at socio-cultural context as we have looked at institutional life. We must see the city as a complex system of interrelated and interdependent social networks and thus work within that web-view. In his essay, "From Homogeneity to Congruence," David Britt argues that, "where the cultural symbols of a congregation are congruent with those of a local community, the gospel will receive an easier hearing." (144) The church or ministry must learn to adapt itself to its surrounding and changing context or else it will lose its power to transform. Viv Grigg builds on this idea by discussing the need to work with indigenous leadership through incarnational ministry – relocating with the poor and building up local leadership. While not all people are called to this, everyone, she believes, is called to identify and serve the poor in some way. We need people in government, business, and so on, to help serve the poor on all levels. (158-159)

Working within interrelated social webs also includes networking. Robert Linthicum defines networking as the creation or maintenance of a "net" of contacts, through which one more effectively carries out an enterprise. It can be human, corporate or electronic (internet communication system). (164) Linthicum explains that we must begin with the belief that God is already at work in the community. Our task as networker is to discover how he is at work and join in. Linthicum sees three forms of networking: 1) Peer-networks (among friends); 2) Primary networks (among colleagues, local pastors, etc.); and 3) Secondary networks (outside related groups, like suburban pastors, businesses, government organizations, etc.) We should start with peer-networking, in order to build a local, stable base, and then

progress outward.

## **Part 4: Samples: Linking Strategy to Model**

“Models are human, conceptual arrangements of reality, more than abstract theories and less than empirical observations,” writes Conn. “They do more than simply inform or explain reality; they reinforce, they stimulate, they shape.”(195) However, Conn later points out that models can often be too simplistic and thus cannot be perfectly applied in every context.

Based on Richard Neibuhr’s work *Christ and Culture*, Conn looks at three models of evangelical urban strategy:

- Christ against the City – city is secular, individualistic and declining rapidly so strategies more moralistic and short-term
- Christ and City in Paradox – city is seen dualistically; we have a stake in the city, but it’s not our home, we’re only pilgrims here so there is a primacy in evangelism vs social action
- Christ Transforming the City – we have an ownership in the city because Christ has already established his kingdom here and is in the process of transforming it; we can join him hopefully in this process.(197-202)

James Westgate shows various strategy models of Christ transforming the city. Two models of particular interest for our research are the Community Center Model which addresses the felt needs of an urban community from within that community and the Community Living Model in which those involved in the ministry share in a community lifestyle. These two models often overlap as seen in the following two models included in this final section.

New Song Community Church is an inter-racial congregation (PCUSA) located in Sandtown, Baltimore, MD. It focuses on racial reconciliation and addressing the felt-needs of the neighborhood through the Sandtown Habitat for Humanity, New Song Community Learning Center, New Song Family Health Center, and EDEN (economic development employment network) Jobs. The Harambee Christian Family Center, in Pasadena, California is an incarnational and holistic Christian community development organization where staff live together in the neighborhood. They focus on reaching the community through its young people through tutoring and skill training, evangelism and discipleship, employment skill training, and summer camp. These examples both seem to be highly effective, though Westgate points out that these models can potentially become ingrown rather than outward-oriented.

In its entirety, this book is extremely helpful. Its comprehensive scope and thorough coverage of all the steps involved in doing urban ministry, make it a good companion for

anyone involved in urban missions.

#### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

1. What has been your experience of the city? How was that shaped?
2. How does the Bible view the city and our relationship with it?
3. What are some ways your church can be more of a transformational presence in its neighborhood?

#### IMPLICATIONS

- Cities are a place that should not be feared but rather seen as a gift to be studied, lived in and transformed. The church can and should play a key role in this effort.

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