

Growth Points

with Gary L. McIntosh, Ph.D.

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Our Mobile World

The history of the world is the story of people in movement. One familiar story recounts how Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt. After God providentially promoted Joseph to a place of authority, he saved his entire family from starvation. Years later the family migrated back to the Promised Land. Joseph's story is one of forced migration, but millions of people have also relocated voluntarily throughout history.

**“The lord
is
urbanizing
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world.”
-Ray Bakke**

Migration takes place for a number of reasons. The United Nations estimates that in 2009 43.3 million people were forcibly displaced. Of these, 27.1 million migrated within their country of origin, while 16.2 million moved beyond their original place of residence.

Other millions migrate of their own free choice from rural to urban environments in search of a better life. In 1800 only three percent of the world's population lived in cities. By 1900 the total was fourteen percent, which increased to thirty percent by 1950. Over the last half century migration to urban centers has been unprecedented, with fifty percent of world population living in cities in 2008.

Rural to urban migration is not slowing down, and it is estimated that by 2050 seventy percent of the world's population will be living in cities. As Ray Bakke noted a quarter century ago, “The Lord is urbanizing his world.” At least fifty million people are in movement somewhere in the world at any given time.

The American hemisphere-North, Central, and South-is characterized by migration. Since the fifteenth century, when early explorers ventured into this part of the world from Europe, migration has gradually increased.

Today's movement of people goes far beyond the relocation of people to the United States. Yet, the main destination of people from Mexico, Canada, and Venezuela is the United States.

People are even migrating out of the United States, with the top five destinations being Mexico, Canada, Puerto Rico, United Kingdom, and Philippines.

What does this mean for our churches?

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Urban centers break down barriers!

Change causes people to be open to the gospel.

Evangelism and Church Growth

The Christian Church is directly linked to the natural movement of human populations to and from the urban centers of the ancient world. Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinth, Athens, and Rome are just a few of the urban cities where the gospel took root. Urban mobility had great impact on the growth of the early church. An even larger movement of people into the cities of the world in the coming half-century will have increasing significance for the growth of the church in the future. Why is this so?

Cities are where people live.

The gospel is about people. As God's Church we are on a mission to preach the gospel of salvation to all nations. There is no better place to do so than in the urban centers of the world. As missiologist Donald McGavran commented, "The assignment is not 'to reach the cities.' The Church has already done that. Her task is to bring urban multitudes to faith and obedience."

Change causes people to be open to the gospel.

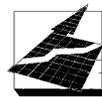
It is a fact of life that the receptivity or responsiveness of individuals waxes and wanes. The most common indicator of receptivity is when people experience change in their lives. Change happens when people migrate to a new place. As newcomers face acculturation into a new culture, they encounter changes, which opens them up to new ways to thinking. Nothing challenges a person's thinking like that of wrestling with a new culture. Recent immigrants to a country are some of the most receptive people in the world, and they often live in urban centers.

Urban centers break down barriers.

As people are thrown tightly together, mixed as it were in the hot bed of urban centers, the natural aspects of life that separate various people are worn away, allowing for gathering of different peoples into multi-ethnic churches. This becomes particularly true of second- and third-generation immigrants.

If a multi-ethnic church is going to grow and thrive, it will do so most readily in urban centers of the world. Even there, however, it is true that peoples of common language, ancestry, origin, and history find it beneficial to band together for support, protection, and encouragement. Since it is common for people to band together, mono-ethnic churches are also necessary if we hope to reach new people for Christ.

In short the mobility of people creates great opportunity to make disciples for Jesus Christ. How is your church responding to this opportunity today? How will it respond in the coming years? What can you begin to do now to prepare your church for the future?



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