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Reading from the urban text

Challenges and possibilities of diversity for pastoral care

topics:
- *the image of global urbanisation*
- *problems for children and youth in cities*
- *religions in cities*
- *the task of the church in the urban context*

Introduction

I write this article as a third-generation American of Mexican descent who served for seventeen years as part of a pastoral team of a multicultural congregation in a highly diverse and mobile community in central Los Angeles and as one trained in urban planning. I do not assume that these experiences make me an expert but they afford me with an appreciation of and an approach to mission in the urban context that has proven useful in my own ministry. What I present is not so much any significant insights or information as an attempt to heighten our awareness about certain dynamics within the urban setting that can shape and expand our role as nurturers of the soul. I trust that you find something in what I share with you helpful and encouraging in your own endeavors to be effective and faithful nurturers of the soul.

A reading from the urban text: The 'global village'

Jaime Lerner, the ecologically-friendly architect and daring former mayor of Curitiba (Brazil), once declared, "If life is the art of encounter, then the city is the setting for encounter."

Once you start looking for them, these encounters are everywhere: That my wife and I should be sitting in a small restaurant in the historic Roman city of Bath (England) sipping on an Australian drink served by a Bolivian waiter to the strains of American jazz. Or eating breakfast one morning in a Korean-owned Mexican cafe in a Central-American neighborhood of Los Angeles only to return the next day to find it became a T-shirt shop the next. Mosques in Copenhagen. Elderly Russian emigrates huddled around a chess board enveloped by Turkish cigarette

smoke in a Hollywood park. These are no longer encounters with the exotic but the sights, sounds and smells of a new world reality; these local multicultural manifestations reflect powerful forces at play on the global scale.

The radical technological and economic changes of the last quarter century have transformed cities into vital links of an highly interconnected global village. With this global transformation has come the evolution of a cultural perspective that, for better or worse, is decidedly urban-oriented, technology-based, and market-driven and in turn raises provocative questions about role of pastoral care providers in this new context.

Cultural invasion and innovation

Cultural invasion and innovation is nothing new. It has been with us since before the first camel caravan ventured afar and certainly from the time Alexander the Great spread Helenism from the Nile to the Ganges. Where new ideas once advanced at the pace of wandering caravans or advancing armies, they are now spread instantly by satellites bringing Hollywood's fantasies and Madison Avenue's commercials to places as widely separated and isolated as the Alaskan tundra, Guatemalan highlands and Kenyan bush.

It has been said that the formation of culture is the process of the telling of stories. Today's far-reaching signals have new tales to tell of affluence, freedom and power--translating cities like New York, Los Angeles, London, Paris into worldwide symbols of the good life. The implicit message in all this is that it is possible to actively take control of one's situation and change one's fate in the city. Well-advertised air routes and cheap fares have turned far away cities into magnets for millions of people who leave their homelands in search of the more glamorous and exciting life they have seen on the screen or heard in the beat of a song played on the radio.

Far from uniform, the emerging global culture is a shifting mixture of experimentation and innovation in which more and less developed societies learn and benefit from one another. The old and new are mutually transformed, ignoring and adopting elements of one another, each mutating almost immediately in the process. Indeed, these transformations take place almost invisibly, without the conscious decisions of the people affected. Yet even under repressive governments – which are ineffectual in curtailing the flow of information – nearly all sectors of the village are subject to what can be called "cultural fusion" or in the curious parlance of social scientists "cultural synchronization." The fear is that Western – often rightly equated with American – influences will ultimately homogenize every cultural nuance into one big "McWorld".

Many changes wrought by this trend, such as the growing demand for freedom of expression and to experiment, can be positive. Other are less desirable: greater competition among people groups at the lower rungs of the economic ladder and alienation from nature. The price of a shrunken world is an uneasy balance between vitality and chaos, health and disease, enterprise and corruption, art and iniquity. This delicate balance always threatens to tip, and when it does, cities can spiral into an anarchy that defies all attempts at reversal. From Belfast, where religious hatred spawns terror, to Los Angeles, where beating of a black motorist by police triggered a rampage of looting and arson, city dwellers have paid a horrible price when ethnic and political tensions boiled to the surface.

Images of the city

These evolutionary and revolutionary processes and some of their repercussions that I have highlighted are visible in the spatial context of our global village – our cities. That is, within the urban built environment there are clear signs of the emerging (postmodern?) cultural reality. Admittedly, the term "city" conjures up a wide variety of images: grottos of slow moving vehicles; a medley of old buildings used in ways for which they were not designed; clean-edged, bland-surfaced rectanguloids; squalor as well as luxury; industry, offices, shops, artist lofts and houses of worship. There are, of course, all manner of cities containing a plethora of experiences. In addition, all sorts of factors-demographic, economic, ecological, theological and so on – interweave to form the living, vibrant and imperfect miniature world that is a city. In turn all of these dynamic variables interact with and are affected by its built substance: some of it is beautiful and good to be in, some of it aggravates the human condition. But the interplay contributes to the creation of new and intriguing patterns of social life and interaction. Cultural invasion and innovation, to what is happening on a global scale. It provides us as well with clues about conditions affecting human life within this emerging (postmodern?) urban world. Let me read from the text.

Since the founding of the first city some 6,000 years ago in the Tigris and Euphrates Valleys, cities have shaped the political, intellectual and moral character of our societies. They are the centers of communication, commerce, creativity and cultural life. At first glance, the complex design and structure of the city can be overwhelming. Once the grand cities were composed of elegant villas and imposing beaux arts office buildings, now gleaming new skyscrapers have shot up to crowd and jostle the skyline. On closer examination we find that the values, hopes, and struggles of those forming our new multicultural urban world are not only reflected on their faces and demeanor but are distinctively etched into the urban landscape itself. Architectural style and urban design have as much to say about the promotion of certain values and cultural perspectives as they have about the role and function of structures or neighborhoods.

Take for example, the Westin Hotel in downtown Los Angeles. When construction of this thirty-five storied, tri-cylinder structure was completed there was no doubt that the building spoke of power, privilege and prestige. Its style was to appeal to the kind of people who benefited from the emerging global economy and could afford to eat, stay and play there. Its mirrorfaced wall prevented those on the outside from peering in. The style and surface materials of the hotel intentionally established boundaries. Those without the means were to be satisfied with simply traveling on the external elevators up to the revolving bar on top of the building. Ironically, the fickle economy of the late 1980s forced a change in ownership and in marketing. Today, the hotel is a popular spot for secondary school events and attracts a more economically eclectic clientele--the former patrons have found other bounded spaces in which to recreate.

An example of urban design are the so-called suburbs or exclusive Cultural invasion and innovation. They were initially planned when cultural exclusion was an openly avowed goal of suburban development. None of those tracts has been unbuilt, and few of them are fully integrated. Except in the way that the suburban flats of inner cities have been integrated. We now have city neighborhoods designed as artificial suburbs or shaped by a singular idea plucked from a period in

history. Some have emerged as "gated" or "guarded" communities. Again, entrance is restricted and, in this case, physically as well as economically. Those "on the inside" are isolated not only from those outside the barriers but from one another. It is rare to get close enough to your neighbors to introduce yourselves, since in most instances the only common space is the street The lack of a public spaces or integrated commercial districts means that residents are utterly dependent on their cars for everything from church to sandwiches; moving from the house to the attached garage, then into the car, and away from the neighborhood, encased in a metal shell, to distant facilities, seldom encountering a familiar face. The older planned communities which were built on the edge or outside of the city forced many to endure long commutes to and from work leaving little time for family or community life. For youth there is often nothing to do and no place to do it. Isolation seems to have been a presupposed desired value. The consequence of this emotional starvation is stunted souls. The family values of those who don't suffer economically died of hunger somewhere during the long commute home or to sterile environments. It should come as no surprise that the youth of these communities are restless and frustrated.

Cities - places of human activities

Urban form is never innocent of social content: it is merely the grid within which we organize our daily lives. The built environment is part of the biography of what it means to be human; it contains the memory of events and ideas that help shape human life. At the same time, people infuse the city with life, they exude culture and they express it in distinctive and novel ways. In the same manner that the city can be an imposing amalgam of structures it is a place of human activities that can be just as complex and overwhelming. If there is one distinct feature about this social dimension of the emerging urban reality it is the increasing diversity of the city's residents. Immigration deepens ethnic diversity and sustains ethnic enclaves, regional migration creates geographic subcultures, and divisions along color lines reinforce their own kind of diversity. Communities forged along lines of generational or sexual preference have emerged and will increasingly strive to exert influence.

People in all parts of society strive to create a better life or sense of wholeness for themselves and their families; in the city they compete with other values to build the appropriate environment. The style of the structures erected or reconfigured for work and living quarters reveal that the emphasis is often on utilitarian and photogenic qualities rather than the nurturance of the human spirit. Nonetheless, people living in cities seem always to muster the needed resources to explore what lies beyond humanity's reach or understanding. It is no small wonder then that the creativity, color, brightness, and vibrancy of life that is found in the city take on kaleidoscopic dimensions that reverberate throughout the urban landscape.

A look within neighborhood shops or corner shopping malls reveals the cosmopolitan character of the evolving city. They are places where the material needs and desires of its new residents are clearly evident. Inviting and descriptive signage advertise what products are being sold. The products themselves, the types and costs, are indicators of who would most likely frequent a particular shop. Koreans transform neighborhoods into their own likeness in Los Angeles just as Indians and Pakistanis have in London. Immigrants from Asia have established

colonies in virtually all the major cities. Indeed, this hypermobility has been a huge factor in the creation of an increasingly borderless world.

Whether they come to the city from across the ocean or border there are dreams at stake. Migrants bring dreams not only for themselves but their children and their children's children. The vegetation planted in the garden, the religious artifacts in the windows, the color of paint chosen for a shop can say much about the values, hopes and desires of those who live or work in the city. Some of these hopes are fulfilled and others shattered. In the day-to-day experience, the struggles and the pains of life are ever present and often become so much part of the landscape that we function as though they do not exist. Daily we walk pass the evidences of failed dreams.

Vulnerable groups in cities

To be sure, the struggle to sustain life – or simply to survive – takes on a creative but disparate edge in our new world. The presence of the consummate recyclers-picking up debris left in public places and rummaging through private garbage--reminds us that not all have found what they had sought to find in the city. (Nevertheless, our communities gain by their exacting labor; our streets and parks are cleaner and our dumps not as full.) The lines outside a Blood Plasma Center or the prostitute on the corner remind us that when legitimate and acceptable avenues of maintaining life are limited or non-existent, people find other ways of generating the means to sustain themselves. Increasingly scenes like these will not be restricted to certain parts of town. This is our world today struggling, conflicted, a world where people find themselves on one side of the prosperity-poverty fence, with most on the poverty side. Those without the means to move, the access to technology and information or the proper status are increasingly finding themselves subject to the dis-empowering affects of the rapidly changing and market driven world. These are the "new poor".

In the city they are vulnerable to being marginalized and forgotten. Cultures placing a high value in family or clan loyalty must now contend with changing priorities that blunt age-old traditions like caring for one's parents. Sadly, the elderly fear being abandoned on the streets by their adult children who have been caught up in the pursuit of material success. Ambiguity about the future wrought by new patterns of social interaction within this context can be unsettling.

Children and youth

Children are also vulnerable. They are politically and economically dependent; they don't have a vote, they cannot earn a living. They are at the mercy of adults for guidance, for a sense of security, and for love. (Are we able to provide that? Can we offer them safe and stimulating places to play and learn?)

One of the tragic specters of the pursuit of happiness translated into purely economic and material terms are the people living on the streets. Whether because of failed public policy, personal afflictions or exhausted resources homeless people do not have access to secure the lodging or care they need. Nevertheless, they as well desire a sense of identity and place – a sense of community and belonging. As such, they have at times taken over open space and transformed it into personal space. Their make-shift "urban camps" are considered an eyesore to some

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but few of us would actually walk up to them and intrude into their space. The use of space by homeless persons is clear evidence that the steel and concrete urban landscape is invitingly malleable. Our use of space demonstrates that fact.

For example, youth are quite adept at modifying space. When sitting places prove inadequate they sit on other structures like low free standing walls. Once that act is executed that space is converted: the wall is now a bench and the bench itself becomes a footstool. Public space can become intimate space when a romantic kiss is exchanged. A blank wall on a building becomes the canvass of free-lance artists or the space to declare the territorial influence of a local youth gang. The patch of land in front of the house or apartment building is now a vegetable garden. We as urbanites are constantly changing space, freeing up space, converting space-working into it who we are and what moves us.

Religions in cities

Religious traditions, the spiritual dimension of the urban context, provide yet another and, perhaps, most provocative texture to the built landscape. Traditional and established Judeo-Christian forms of religion are still very present in Western Society. Their places of worship remain impressive in their architectural style but the activities inside are increasingly disconnected from the change around them. However, contrary to popular thought, the built environment testifies that religion is alive and well in the emerging urban world. It just isn't always Christian.

While historic forms of religion continue to attend to the spiritual needs of their traditional constituencies they now have to be understood in relation to a host of different and evolving religious expressions. As people move to a new land or city they carry with them their beliefs and understanding of the sacred. It should not be too surprising then to find even in the most ordinary of neighborhoods, transplanted expressions of world religions and sects. Asian architectural design may reveal a Buddhist temple in the community. A Muslim tower on the urban horizon testifies to the growing global presence of the Islamic faith.

The built environment further demonstrates that the religious community is not only about influencing how people conduct their lives but about transforming buildings and space as well. A neighborhood house in Central Los Angeles is now international headquarters of the Evangelical Holiness Mission Center of America just two houses up from a Buddhist Center. Who is evangelizing whom? The answer is not clear, but the evidence in the landscape suggests that buildings are indeed being converted. In the middle of Los Angeles, two blocks from an holiness church, one block from a former Sephardic synagogue (now a Korean Presbyterian church), four blocks from a historic Presbyterian church, three blocks from the founding Church of Religious Science, a vacated mortuary is transformed into an Islamic Center. Every Friday at noon the Islamic hour of worship the neighborhood becomes a Muslim community. Scenes like these punctuate the urban landscape – ever transforming, converting space into sacred place. A telling sign of humanity's yearning for spirituality sustenance.

New religious expressions proliferate in the city. They are as controversial as the Church of Scientology and as provocative as the selfrealization movement. Within the Hispanic landscape herbal medicinal shops sell religious artifacts. The "Botanica" as it is called is sometimes affiliated with Santeria, one of those syncretistic religions that have come from the Caribbean via Latin America. Charis-

matic or Pentecostal groups are aggressively competing with Santeria vying for the loyalty among Central Americans.

These "religious artefacts" in the built environment point to the irreducible fact of religious pluralism and other sources of cultural diversity. There as well hopeful signs of intercultural community building within the changing sacred landscape. Traditional forms take on new shapes as old-line churches open their doors to other ethnic and faith expressions. We see that different ethnic groups not only reside in the same community but even their respective religious expressions come together if not to worship in concert then to share the same roof. A Lutheran Church shares its facility with a Korean Reform church. A Hispanic Pentecostal church cohabitates with a Korean Presbyterian church. A Disciples' congregation shares it sanctuary with a Jewish congregation in order to celebrate the Jewish High Holy Days together.

The quest for hope and meaning

There was a time when virtually all of our European and American ancestors and missionaries could imagine no substitute for the church. Now the church must compete for attention with a host of alternative pursuits, not to mention the forces creating the new urban world. The Christian story as articulated in the physical landscape now seems to survive in random vestiges. Sometimes these remnants blend into the larger terrain and become hidden or lost.

In a kinetic and kaleidoscopic postmodern environment as the city, we as Christians must be concerned about who we are and what we are about. How are we to be defined? Do we stand for exclusivity or engender an attitude of acceptance? Do we foster ethnic or class reconciliation? Do we embody an ethic of service and caring? Do we bring a moral dimension to public life? Do we represent justice and mercy? Do we promote a deeper relationship to God? Do we reflect anything more than cultural ethnocentrism? Do we encourage economic and environmental responsibility? If these values are what define us as Christians, are they an integral part of the pastoral care enterprise?

Amidst the complexity and richness of the landscape of our new urban world – no matter the class, color of skin, cultural heritage or creed – the quest for hope and meaning is very evident. It is part and parcel of the human journey. To be sure, some continue to seek to find it in status and wealth, but all are somehow searching for something more, reaching for tomorrow.

Those who feel locked out of mainstream society, who feel and are vulnerable, may at time not feel that they free to be all that God created them to be. In the struggle for light in a setting of darkness, are the majority of the residents of the global village. These are my neighbors and yours; the grandfather, the recently arrived immigrant, the young, the unemployed, the troubled, the hope-filled, the depressed.

In the midst of the challenges posed by the new urban world can we express our faith boldly enough? Is there a place for it? Can we still bring light into a world of darkness? Ultimately, how will we bring the good news of hope and healing to the inhabitants of our new urban world – or simply to the boy next door?

A reading from the text – the mission of the church

The global dimensions of the contemporary urban world sets new challenges as new technologies and communications alter the way we live and relate. The poly-ethnic, multicultural character of the urban landscape raises some profound questions as to the locus and mission of the church. I am not trying to identify or advance particular issues nor suggest specific stands that Christians should affirm. I do believe, however, that as nurturers of the soul we can make a substantive contribution to this new era but in a manner perhaps different from the way it contributed during the past. A broadening of our understanding of pastoral care may indeed help us to address the fissures in society that we know all too well. Our intent being to infuse the world signs of hope and healing. Let me comment on some areas to explore.

Community-building

The quest for community will be increasingly difficult in the coming years as technological and communication innovations foster new patterns of social life. Certainly the rise of small groups or self-help groups reflects the need for community. Internet chat rooms as well affirm the impulse to link. So do youth gangs! But they are no substitute for community to which Jesus call us. Not discounting their benefits, sooner or later, people will discover that these groups, virtual communities and associations do not suffice. Nurturing the soul of an individual entails facilitating stronger networks of community that hold us accountable and helps to move outward.

The role of the Church *may* well go beyond community-building among believers. Admittedly, it may be tough going within a diverse and fluid urban culture and yet in the long run more rewarding for the Christian Church to effect coalitions with neighborhood groups, and civic associations to work for broad objectives of economic, environmental, social and cultural justice. More important, the community-building may prove to be a viable vehicle by which the message of the gospel can be clearly articulated and affirmed within the public arena.

Peace-building

But the pastoral care-provider will be faced with much more than the task of bridging individuals and groups. Racial, ethnic, and regional divisions continue

to be significant in the urban context, despite great opportunities for connection and exchange. The widening chasm between the "haves" and the "have nots", both politically and economically, will only exacerbate divisions corresponding to ethnic and geographic lines of separation.

Significant change cannot occur without conflict. One of the lessons learned from observing the emerging urban world is that the fault lines are seldom static or easily discernible. For example, just when it appeared that boundaries between political and geographic rivals were beginning to erode new tensions have appeared. Ideological battles are likely to be waged on numerous fronts, challenging religious leaders, both lay and clergy, to be responsibly involved in these conflicts as peace-builders. Moreover, attention must be given to the smaller or less vocal communities whose importance may have been overshadowed by such tensions.

Mid-wives to a new people

The fact of the matter is that we are embarking on a global path that tests the notion of race and ethnicity as anthropological categories. Biracial and multiethnic families are no longer an anomaly but paradigm for human interaction. Contemporary social analysts are hard pressed as to what to call it. Jose Vasconcelos some seventy years ago gave us the term in his seminal work *La Raza Cosmica* (The Cosmic Race). In that book he wrote about *mestizaje* (from "mestizo", meaning "mixed" or hybrid). This mestizaje speaks of a "new people" originating from two or more ethnically disparate people. In fact, we only need to look at Latin Americans to gain a glimpse of what this mestizaje might look like. They reflect the biological mixture of European, Amerindian and African blood. But the pioneers of the new urban world, as the global marketing forces have already discerned, may well be our youth.

Our world cities have become incubators of a bold new mix of humanity. Our youth have created new social classifications for themselves: white chocolate, funky Aztecs and honorary homegirls. Such definitions in an ever-transfiguring urban world wreak havoc with stubborn conventional stereotypes and archaic notions about ethnic or national identity.

On one level, today's global teenager exemplifies the *mestizaje*, the new cosmic race of Vasconcelos' vision, in that they deny any pretense to "cultural purity"; and they integrate into one the existing races or ethnic groups. At the same time, as already mentioned, mere association does not make for community. Nor is a collection of people a community.

The message of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. reverberates in the urban village today: the beloved community must be lifted up. They shall know us by our love. The message is clear: we are to proclaim unity not uniformity, among our neighbors of the new urban village. In the spirit of reconciliation a new sense of peoplehood is being called forth. We must be prepared to nurture the progenitors so that a healthy birth is experienced.

Messengers of hope

Besides ethnic diversity and religious pluralism, the global village appears to be characterized increasingly by consumerism. The consumer culture so evident in nearly every billboard or commercial strip is driving people to work harder just to keep up, partly because they feel they need the material amenities of a comfortable life. They have confused standard of living for quality of life. Ultimately, the "American Dream," whether it be the domestic or international version, will reveal itself to be elusive for most people. At the same time, the problems of the needy and disadvantaged are likely to become even more severe and not so distant. These dynamics point out that the old questions about God and Mammon, about wealth and injustice, development and stewardship, undoubtedly, will resurface even more vigorously.

Clearly the challenges ahead require a sober assessment of the economic future. But taking our Christian faith seriously argues strongly for an optimistic appraisal of the future. Perhaps Christianity's greatest contribution lies in the very orientation it poses toward the future itself. The Christian faith has always included a

central message of hope; something learned from those who have struggled on the margins. As the world is being reshaped, that message will clearly be needed as never before.

Concluding remarks

As we enter the next millennium every aspect of what we call the urban context is indelibly marked by the powerful changes emanating from the globalization of our world and the advances within technology. The profound transformations in peoples, institutions, demography and topography are evident in the new urban reality. The continuous class and ethnic conflict, internal social disorder (communal, familial and individual), spiritual movements, and patterns of geographic mobility and economic stress have become part of the our urban terrain. Our mission of sharing the transformative power of hope seems never to have been more urgent.

Above all else it is not so much what we are to do in the cultural reality as what the context of globality does to us. My hope is that we will be able to experience acceptance, care and support as we come to grips with this new urban reality. In the hopes that in the process we discover more fully what it means to live as God's people. It is the context in which we can understand our lives and interpret our own stories and experiences in light of a common memory and vision. In the end, we are given the ability to act corporately and individually in the continuing ministry of Jesus Christ in our lives – in every aspect.