

THE URBAN IMPERATIVE

Prepared by

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For

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The Urban Imperative booklet is a resource from the Mission Strategy office of the United States – Canada Mission Evangelism department of the International Church of the Nazarene. It is hoped that this material would serve as a catalyst for increased awareness of the biblical mandate to reach our cities with the Good News.

With the rapid urbanization of the US demography, our church is faced with the challenge of capitalizing on the opportunities for evangelism and outreach. This dynamic suggests the ongoing creative activity of God among humankind.

For better or worse, the rural populations are declining and the urban centers are increasing in density and absolute number. Could it be that God would use the talents and giftedness of Nazarenes to reclaim the mandate to minister in the neglected quarters of our cities? Could God find in the people called Nazarenes a remnant committed to such passionate evangelism?

Hopefully, the answer is yes! With exciting creativity, Nazarene congregations can revitalize and reorient ministries to reach our cities for Christ. We have a history and tradition of compassionate social service ministries among the poor, the oppressed, and the homeless. **The Urban Imperative** calls for a new currency of genuine partnership with those who care about the city. To miss this opportunity will be poor stewardship!

Use this booklet to mobilize individuals and stimulate dialogue about the new frontier of ministry to the cities. The Urban Imperative could become a critical currency in our centennial thrust toward celebration and praise.

Oliver R. Phillips – director Mission Strategy US/Canada

“We seek the simplicity and the Pentecostal power of the primitive New Testament Church. The field of labor to which we feel especially called is in the neglected quarters of the cities and wherever else may be found waste places and souls seeking pardon and cleansing from sin. This work we aim to do through the agency of city missions, evangelistic services, house to house visitation, caring for the poor, comforting the dying. To this end we strive personally to work with God and to incite others so to do.” – *Articles of Faith and General Rules of the Church of the Nazarene, November 26, 1895*

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INVESTING IN THE CITY

*“The Church must deal with the cities
or become an irrelevant appendage to society.
. . . If the Church cannot be a strong, dynamic influence
in the cities, it will be very difficult for the
Church to be a viable spiritual force at all.”¹*
-- R. Franklin Cook, missiologist,
former editor in chief, *Holiness Today*

Several years ago, a survey among pastors and laypeople in the Church of the Nazarene revealed that one-third of them grew up in a small town, and almost the same percentage was raised in a rural area.² Clearly for church leadership within the United States and Canada, small towns and the rural heartland are much more comfortable and understood than the city.

Urban means “relating to or located in a city, characteristic of the city or city life.” A related word is *urbane*, which means “polite, refined, and often elegant in manner.”³ This is hardly what Christians—particularly white evangelicals—envision when they hear the words “urban” or “city.” On the contrary, they are much more likely to conjure up images of crime, congestion, pollution, inner-city blight, and poverty.

The growth of urban society is neither recent nor exclusive to one country. Every nation on earth is experiencing urbanization. In 1920, the urban population in the U.S. exceeded the rural. By 1970, the process of urbanization in the United States was essentially complete.⁴

To take seriously the Great Commission — going into the world and making disciples of all nations (people groups)—requires the Church of today to go to the cities. Over half the world’s population, which God so loved that “he gave his only Son,” (John 3:16) lives in urban areas. In the United States, three out of every four people live in urban centers, and some estimate that urban dwellers comprise almost 90 percent of the United States population.

To take seriously the Great Commandment—loving God and our neighbors (anyone in need, as Jesus defined “neighbor”)—requires recognizing and knowing the needs of our neighbors. Will we be able to see the needs if we are not living and ministering where the majority of people in need live? Or is it possible that we can be intentional about developing a *ministry of presence* there?

For a denomination committed to the Great Commission and Great Commandment, the implications are startlingly obvious. The divine imperative that has always animated Wesleyan-Holiness people has become for our generation, in essence, the *urban imperative*.

Recent history shows that, as a church preparing for centennial celebrations, we have embraced this imperative intellectually, and to some extent, programatically.

- The 1972 General Assembly adopted a report calling for a significant commitment to the cities. Ministries were implemented, and in the early 1970s two of the Nazarenes’ most visible urban missions since Bresee were founded: the Community of Hope in Washington, D.C., and the Manhattan Church of the Nazarene in New York City (The Lamb’s).

- From 1985 to 1995 Thrust to the Cities, a global denominational emphasis, successfully planted churches in 15 world-class cities.
- In 1997, the General Board adopted a recommendation based on “agreement at every level of the church leadership that a comprehensive, denominational urban mission strategy is needed to take advantage of the opportunities for evangelism and new church development in the increasingly urbanized, multicultural societies of the United States and Canada as well as the rest of the world.”⁵

While these steps underscore a covenantal awareness of the urban imperative, implementing strategies and maintaining focus on urban missions remain the challenge. This challenge can be overcome by a consistent approach to urban missions integrated by a systematic and disciplined plan for long-term investment in the city.

A Long-Term Investment Strategy

Let’s look at some steps that might help us as a denomination make a long-term investment in urban missions.

1. We can honestly address our theology and identity. Although we identify ourselves as a Holiness church in the Wesleyan theological tradition, surveys show that a significant percentage of our pastors and laypersons hold traditional or neo-fundamentalist beliefs and behaviors.⁶ Are the core values outlined by the general superintendents the actual values of a majority of Nazarene leaders in the United States?⁷ One’s theology of the human condition, the meaning of salvation and holiness, Last Days, and Second Coming will definitely influence attitudes toward the challenges of our cities. We must not forget that the *place*—both physically and psychologically—from which we “do theology” will affect both process and outcome. For example, Black Americans read and interpret the story of Moses and the Exodus far differently than white English-speaking Americans. Position and perspective matter a great deal.

2. We can determine whether our missiology and the actual practices of missionaries are congruent with our stated Wesleyan-Holiness theology. What distinguishes our outreach techniques and evangelism tactics from churches not in the Holiness tradition?

3. We can address our ecclesiology, how our theology relates to our church, particularly how the church thinks about itself in relation to the Kingdom of God and the world. Do our corporate worship practices help us engage or protect us from an urban culture? Do our polity and administrative structures reinforce or conflict with a Wesleyan-Holiness theology? What do we ask pastors and church leaders to “measure” in their reporting to district and general assemblies?

4. We can be certain we are experiencing entire sanctification. The fathers and mothers of our denomination were quite clear that the evidence of being in the experience of perfect love was full devotion to God and service to the

poor. In most cases this involved the “neglected quarters of the city.”⁸

5. We can consider forming groups among our congregations or Wesley-style “classes” to seek the heart-cleansing experience of perfect love. We should ask the Holy Spirit to purify our hearts by faith from any immoral actions or attitudes including pride, lust, racial prejudices, economic arrogance, gluttony, and greed.

Churches should invite interested individuals not a part of their congregation who live in the city to form another “class” for the purpose of studying and seeking Christian holiness. Such a gathering might develop into an urban house church or a mission group that discerns a call to serve the city.

6. We can pray for the city where we live or the one nearest us. Each time we see or hear a news report about some sinful act in the city, we should ask the Holy Spirit to help us resist recoiling with disgust and instead be moved with compassion. One writer said that each time he heard a siren, he realized there were lives in need, possibly facing heartbreaking tragedy. He used the siren as a “trigger” to pause and pray for both those in jeopardy and the responders. It is difficult to hate people or things when we are praying for them on a regular basis.⁹

7. We can consider conducting personal or small group studies of the city. Cities mentioned in the Scriptures, including the Early Church’s missionary strategy, help us construct a theological perspective on the city.

In addition to biblical and theological approaches, individuals and groups should study a target city. Historically, what are the city’s origin and significant historic events? Anthropologically, who are the people groups and cultures present? Sociologically, examine the various components of the city, such as governmental and educational systems, urban design, religions represented, and the arts. How do these interrelate with each other? Economically, what are the commercial “engines,” and who are the economically powerful?

8. Local churches and districts can take an inventory of their financial and building assets. Can under-utilized property in the city be located? Has someone made a major gift to the district for church planting and evangelism that could be directed for urban church starts? Could a “Partnership Fund” be developed to find and purchase urban properties for use in church planting, education institutes, social ministries, and economic development ventures?

9. We can take an inventory of human resources as well. What leadership assets are available? Can we identify people who demonstrate calls and gifts to serve the city and who are willing to relocate? What leaders already living in the city share a Wesleyan-Holiness theology and philosophy of ministry with whom we could partner or affiliate? Are there leaders, inside or outside the Church of the Nazarene, who possess multilingual and/or multicultural gifts who could be recruited and mobilized?¹⁰ Careful effort should be made to identify not only men but women leaders as well.

10. We can study traditional missiological strategies and techniques used in international missions. Can any of these be adapted to urban areas in the U.S. and Canada?

All of these actions could be centered in prayer, earnestly seeking God through all means of grace such as the Lord's Supper and the spiritual disciplines including fasting, meditation, silence, and solitude.

You are always invited to contact the office of Mission Strategy USA/Canada for further resources such as the *Urban Imperative* video, online help at www.UrbanNazarene.org, and the potential of a live, onsite consultation with urban specialists.

The Cost and Return on Investment

"Is the monetary cost of ministry in the city just too high?" some are asking. Like everything else in the city, expenses for the basics of ministry tend to be more costly in urban areas than in rural areas or small towns. As stewards of God, it is not inappropriate to question the "return on investment" in urban ministries. However, the "return" must be carefully identified as biblical and consistent with Kingdom priorities. It is equally important to ask, "What price can be placed on obedience to the Great Commission and Great Commandment?"

Behind this question of cost often lies an assumption that urban churches are small, struggling, and slow to grow, requiring constant financial support from outside sources. In some cases, this may be true. However, a blanket assumption that all urban congregations are financially dependent is simply false. Some of our largest and strongest congregations today in terms of attendance and monies raised are in urban centers.

At the same time, some urban pastors ministering with the poor or new immigrants have expressed growth problems. "We cannot afford to grow anymore until we can find more resources. People are being saved, but they are still hungry, homeless, and under-employed."

Although this challenge of disciple-making exists, authentically Wesleyan-Holiness ministry has historically experienced "redemption and lift" among the poor. As people believe the gospel and begin to live in Christ and in fellowship with other members of God's body, personal habits change, and lifestyle choices begin aligning with biblical stewardship. The congregation collaborates with the poor in establishing context-appropriate opportunities for empowerment through ministries in education, health care, housing and business development, and "speaking truth to the powers" in seeking to change unjust labor practices, housing, and racial or employment discrimination. Those who were oppressed and in bondage from bad habits, poor choices, unexpected disasters, or socio-economic injustices find they are truly being set at liberty by the Good News of Jesus.

According to one veteran urban pastor, partnerships are the most beneficial approach. "Many denominations give a grant to someone to pastor a church. As I learned 25 years ago, that puts my church and me on welfare. Instead, I want that money put in the bank as a line of credit." When a church building needs repair, he suggests, "Create your own community-development foundation with a building program and building manager. Offer classes on building, and charge your neighbors for taking the class. Instead of having volunteer carpenters come to fix up your

building, get them to teach the classes. In the process, they just happen to fix your building.”¹¹ By this process, no one has been demeaned; instead all have been empowered with new skills and confidence that they can work. Eventually, the church can employ those skilled people to rehabilitate housing in the community. The result is new skills, created jobs, and dollars generated by and re-circulated in the neighborhood.

Of course, urban ministry involves other “costs” as well. People often ask, “Is it safe to live in the city?” Frankly, much of the violence in cities is overstated, especially in major media centers such as Los Angeles and New York.

But make no mistake—there are dangers facing the urban minister. The city is not always friendly. In some neighborhoods to which we are called, violence is the currency of the streets. The urban worker must make peace with God on these matters of personal safety.

In light of these real concerns, we might well recall the words of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: “A man’s not fit to live until there is something he is willing to die for.” We need the clarity of mission that Dr. King must have had when he preached these words in his final sermon to his congregation at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta:

Every now and then I think about my own death, and I think about my own funeral. And I don’t think of it in a morbid sense. Every now and then I ask myself, “What is it that I would want said?”. . . I want you to be able to say that day, that I did try to feed the hungry. And I want you to be able to say that day, that I did try, in my life to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say, on that day, that I did try, in my life, to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity. Yes, if you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice; say that I was a drum major for peace; I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter. I won’t have any money to leave behind. I won’t have the fine and luxurious things of life to leave behind. But I just want to leave a committed life behind.¹²

Two months after Dr. King spoke these words, an assassin pulled the trigger on a high powered rifle. A 30.06 caliber bullet hurtling over 1,000 miles per hour tore into his neck as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Dr. King’s voice box was silenced, but his words and witness still speak.

Just the night before his death, he preached these memorable words:

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the Promised Land. And so I’m happy, tonight. I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.¹³

We must love God and love the city to which God has sent us. Perfect love casts out fear.

According to an old Jewish folk-saying, "We do not see things as they are. We see them as we are." Could it be that our distaste and fear of the city says more about us than it does about the city?

Because Jesus delivered a fatal blow to the evil one through His life, death, resurrection, and exaltation, we are not afforded the luxury to view any person, any situation, any city as hopeless. God has not given up on this world. Even now the whole creation is groaning for redemption. Dare we be so brash to condemn that which God sent His only Son to save?

Ask God to place the city on your heart. Ask God for a love to see its possibilities. As Goethe said, "Treat a man as he appears to be and you make him worse. But treat a man as if he already were what he potentially could be, and you make him what he should be."

This truth applies not only to how we relate to men and women but also to how we approach our cities. God sees them for what they could be—places of justice, peace, and security. We are called to be God's ministers of reconciliation, servant peacemakers, and truth-tellers. May we be blessed with a prophetic imagination to see things as they should be.

The Currency of Urban Mission

What will characterize urban ministry in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition? How will ministry invested in the city look?

It will *not* look like ministry as usual. Like Wesley and Bresee, we must create entirely new structures and responses to our urban realities while respecting the "traditions" of our denomination. In doing so, we recognize that we will inevitably encounter resistance from those who hold to the existing status quo in Nazarene theology, missiology, practices, and polity.

If an urban theology is informed by the greatness of a Triune God, then an urban missiology will reflect another foundational Christian doctrine: Incarnation. Urban mission must be "incarnational." The redemptive action of God must take on flesh and blood reality in dealing with people's personal sin and the city's systems and structures. Such mission work is done onsite and in the context of a long-term commitment to a city.

Urban mission is not a program to be brought to the city as much as a process to be lived out in the city with the people, empowering them to determine their future.¹⁴ Some accomplish this through *community development*.¹⁵ Others believe that community development can become too programmatic and argue instead for *community organizing* for long-term development to be truly owned by the community.¹⁶

Bob Linthicum, who has been involved with community organizing in both the U.S. and in developing countries, warns that we should expect community organizing in the U.S. to take much longer and cost more money than in developing nations.

Prayerful study must be given to the kind of evangelism practiced in urban ministry. Although some methodologies effective in rural areas or small towns may not be so in urban centers, the larger issue requiring careful consideration is not technique but rather the *nature* of biblical

evangelism. Understanding biblical evangelism is vital to proclaiming the Good News to the city with integrity, authenticity, and power.

We must consider: How is the gospel “good news” for urban dwellers? What does it mean to proclaim Christ to the city? What will urban centers of gospel proclamation look like?¹⁷

The Scriptural Meaning and Value of the Gospel

We must remember the message we proclaim is the *evangel*, the gospel, which can be translated “Good News.” That Good News is the news of the Kingdom of God breaking into this world. God’s rule has come. John the Baptist gives a preview of the news story, but Jesus is the main reporter. He announces that people should change their thinking and believe now because the Reign of God has arrived. In this instance, truly the Message and the Messenger were one and the same.

Although not everyone had the same opinions on exactly how that Kingdom would come, the results of its coming were generally held in agreement. The just rule of God’s Messiah would bring shalom, a time when righteousness and peace would kiss (Isaiah 51:7, 58:6-7, Psalm 85:10). In other words, all God’s creation would function as designed.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18-19).

These words from the prophet Isaiah were understood to speak of the promised Messiah, or Anointed One. God’s Messiah would do the work of God. The Messiah would announce the year of Jubilee when justice and peace would be present in the community.

The commonly held expectation was that the Messiah would accomplish all that had been promised: to save the people from their sins, which they understood to include right relationship with God and people and shalom, a health and wholeness, and holiness in all aspects of their lives and communities. All this, Jesus said to His neighbors in His inaugural sermon in His hometown synagogue, had been fulfilled in their hearing.

His homefolks’ immediate reaction to His message was not an invitation for “extended meetings.” It was an enthusiastic response to be sure but not in a way that made Jesus want to hang around for post-sermon fellowship.

Nevertheless, others would respond far differently. Through His deeds and words, Jesus drew followers that gladly believed His claim and confessed Him as Messiah, or Christ.

The New Testament writers affirm Jesus is God incarnate. He announces the Good News, and He *is* the Good News. Jesus is the Christ, the complete fulfillment of the people’s long-expected hopes for God’s redemptive in-breaking.

His ministry resonated with those to whom the power and potential of Kingdom Jubilee would mean most. Only in a militaristic or nationalistic sense of messianic expectation did

Jesus fail to perform. His ministry and mission fulfilled all the Old Testament hopes to save His people from their sins. This salvation saturated *all* facets of life with redemptive love.

For this mission of salvation Jesus sent His disciples, while still with them: To preach, teach, heal, and announce the Kingdom of God was at hand. Repent and believe! This was Jubilee language indicative of radical reversal in the daily lives of people and their social systems.

For this mission of salvation Jesus also sent the disciples at His Ascension: To make disciples and teach them “all that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). These words allow for no division of those teachings into categories of importance.¹⁸

The Early Church demonstrated this comprehensive salvation in the communities it touched. The gospel of Christ has the power to transform lives and reform communities. The authentic heralding of the evangel produces disciples and church planters who understand H. Richard Niebuhr’s maxim: Christians are not “those who are saved out of the perishing world, but . . . those who know that the world is being saved.”¹⁹

John Wesley’s understanding of Scripture offers a much fuller view of salvation than many American evangelicals teach:

By salvation I mean, not barely . . . deliverance from hell, or going to heaven; but a present deliverance from sin, a restoration of the soul to its primitive health, its original purity; a recovery of the divine nature; the renewal of our souls after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness, in justice, mercy, and truth. . . . Now, if by salvation we mean a present salvation from sin, we cannot say, holiness is a condition of it; for it is the thing itself. Salvation, in this sense, and holiness, are synonymous terms.²⁰

Offering people salvation *in this sense* is a distinctly different task than the practices of “evangelism” so common to American Evangelicals.

Mr. Wesley also made no “distinction between individual and social ethics because the Bible would not allow it.” Timothy Smith warned Nazarene leaders in 1979 about “our tendency not to define entire sanctification as perfect love toward our fellow human beings as well as toward God.”²¹ Investing wisely in the cities will require us to recapture an understanding of holiness that includes perfect love for God and our neighbors.

Wesleyans claim to have a radical optimism because of God’s great grace. We need a greater view of sin to go with this greater grace. We must regain a view of sin as both personal and systemic, along with an equally expansive view of the Atonement that affirms what the Scriptures teach: In Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and ascension, the works of the devil are destroyed in both individual human hearts and social institutions.

Fully Funding the Urban Investment Plan

We must make a full commitment to be present in the city with the gospel, advocating for those in need and on the edges of society, providing healing ministries for those sick

and bound by addictions, promoting and developing ministries for justice and peace in the community.

To declare the gospel successfully to an urbanized world will require investing the resources necessary to understand and engage city life, developing “languages” that communicate in urban cultures, and supporting the research and development of new forms of congregational ministries.

The Church founded by Jesus was born in a city. The church named after Jesus the Nazarene was likewise born in another city nearly two millennia later. Our denomination subsequently formed was galvanized by a desire for Christian perfection and a passionate love for the poor, primarily in America’s cities.

Our tradition and theology view the city as a particularly valuable place for ministry. God has given us a history of success in urban ministry.

It is now imperative that we revive the church’s historic and recent engagement with the city. It is imperative that we reclaim the God-given mission to “spread scriptural holiness.”²² It is imperative for our theological integrity. It is imperative that we commit to a full engagement and investment in the cities of Canada and the United States. Anything less will be insufficient and potentially damaging to the credibility of the gospel.

Poverty in the city is more than economic. We must also recognize in many city neighborhoods a poverty of hope, a loss of belief in the possibilities of a future, giving up thinking that things can ever change. In other neighborhoods, a poverty of affluence chokes out an abundant life, even in the midst of an abundance of things. For these urban dwellers, the questions are not about economic success but rather about finding everlasting significance for life.

The Christian gospel provides full salvation for every kind of poverty. There is forgiveness of sins, freedom from past guilt, and possibility for a new future through faith, producing new purpose and meaning. Those who may have given up believing anything good could happen find themselves alive with holy imagination, a radical optimism, and “the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).

When people really believe that things can be changed and that they can participate in that process, a foundation for lasting transformation has been laid. Regaining lost hope often requires the faithful presence of others standing by and living with them, being God’s grace in the flesh to them, believing with and sometimes for them in the gospel’s radical claim that God’s steadfast love is the greatest of all powers. For these reasons, the Church’s constant, full investment in the city is critical to the gospel’s credibility.

Our level of investment in urban ministries will prove where our doctrinal and missional heart truly is. As our Lord said, “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6:21).

Bullish or Bearish on Society’s Future?

The Church itself can be a place of little hope if it views society from what sociologists call a “paradigm of secularization.” This viewpoint says, “As modernization increases, religion becomes more marginal and is replaced by secular understandings and values.”²³

If we operate from this paradigm, we will buy into the philosophy that “we live in a post-Christian era in a society that is hostile toward the church. The demise of the traditional family is near. Without moral values, the criminal population increases so rapidly that we cannot build enough jails fast enough to house it. Churches must increasingly appeal to participants who are selfish consumers. We can no longer take the loyalty of people for granted. Religious ideas cannot be authoritatively imposed. We should not use the Bible, the hymnal or symbols like the cross since Americans have few, if any, Christian understandings.” According to Nazarene sociologist Kenneth Crow, this paradigm of secularization “appears to be the dominant understanding among social scientists and in the church.”²⁴

A denomination operating from this paradigm will be far less likely to invest in intentional, sustained efforts of urban missions. In spite of the demographic facts about the vast majority of city people needing and potentially responsive to the transforming love of Christ, any church filtering these facts through the secularization paradigm will likely conclude that it is impossible to transform godless cities.

Thankfully, there is another paradigm, one that views “the church and individuals as free agents who are able to make choices. It is not deterministic.” Those who operate from this paradigm see “the church as an independent variable, able to influence society. . . . It is clear that religion has not become marginal to American society.”²⁵ These Christians see cities as anything but godless and recognize the wide array of religious and spiritual practices available in urban communities.

Few city dwellers are atheists. The question for most is not “Does God exist?” but “What is God like?” and “Is God powerful enough to make a difference in my life and community?”

In spite of this spiritual searching and the positive ministry paradigm that affirms the Church’s potential to influence the city, sociologist Kenneth Crow reflected in 1996, “It seems to me we Nazarenes tend to understand the church and our role in society from the viewpoint of something like the secularization paradigm. . . . If there has been a shift in Nazarene identity, perhaps it is because we came to accept the secularization paradigm.” Yet, as Crow suggests, is not the “free will paradigm . . . a better fit with our beliefs and heritage?”²⁶

What we believe about free will versus secularism is not an esoteric issue of interest only to researchers, sociologists, and academicians. On the contrary, the paradigm we choose through which to view our world and more specifically our view of urban ministry has profound significance. Our viewpoint will influence our theology, missiology and mission strategies, educating systems, and institutional decisions regarding resources and priorities. How we define our obedience to the Great Commission and Great Commandment and what that will look like in practice will depend in part upon the paradigm from which we choose to offer our “obedience.”

If we are faithful to our Wesleyan-Holiness heritage, we will fully invest in urban ministries that will serve all Christendom with a Kingdom view, holistic in approach,

ceasing to make biblically inaccurate distinctions between personal and public righteousness.²⁷ Our Wesleyan-Holiness roots call us to minister incarnationally and with a passionate, gracious optimism in the possibilities for personal and social transformation.

“God’s command through Jeremiah is yet to be internalized today,

“Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jeremiah 29:7).

--Oliver R. Phillips, director of Mission Strategy USA/Canada for the Church of the Nazarene

The Preferred Future

Nazarene Theological Seminary's president Ron Benefiel (former pastor of Los Angeles First Church of the Nazarene and founder of Bresee Institute for Urban Training) has noted, "The need and opportunity for the Church to minister in the city is evident. The challenge is certainly there before us. The question is whether or not we will respond by taking the good news of the Gospel into our cities."²⁸

Nazarenes claim to take the Scriptures seriously. Then we must take the Great Commission and Great Commandment equally seriously. Add to these the Scriptural truths the facts of an urbanized world and the imperative before us could not be more clear.

The mission strategy of the New Testament church is evident from a quick scan of the list of letters the apostles wrote to the churches they had planted in the cities of their day. For those who use the "harvest principle" to determine deployment of mission resources, the ripe harvest fields today are in the cities. For holiness people, this harvest has always been in the cities—from Wesley in Bristol, Palmer in New York, the Booths in London, to Bresee in Los Angeles. Along with the countless others they inspired and led, these men and women courageously responded and showed us the way of the urban imperative.

Ministering with people in cities is challenging, the issues often complex, and questions will be many. But there can be little doubt it is the imperative for the Church today, and especially so for a denomination in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition.

What remains to be seen is will we as a people be faithful to Scripture, its historic tradition, a reasonable, rational understanding of population realities, and recent experience in the cities. Will the Church responding to this urban imperative, direct its resources to minister intentionally and intensively and extensively in the urban centers of the United States and Canada?

Should these arguments prove unpersuasive, let me appeal baldly to the pragmatic, "can do" attitude of the American culture. A church committed to the Great Commission and Great Commandment surely realizes that it can be faithful to these only as it can connect with people. Today, the overwhelming majority of people in the United States live in an urbanized context. Now what can be the long term result for church growth and the literal survival of the institution by planting churches in rural and small towns since fewer and fewer people live in those places? Religious sects that will not invite "outsiders" into the fellowship and practice celibacy do not exist long. Churches that insist on ministering exclusively to their own kind and in their group's native language will soon disappear as the second and third generation children of these immigrants speak primarily the language of *their* country and limit use of their parents and grandparents' traditions to holidays and the occasional family celebration.

Ron Sider wrote a few years ago: “three sets of facts simply do not fit together. There is widespread poverty in our world. The Bible says God and his faithful people have a special concern for the poor. And North American Christians give less and less every year.”²⁹ To his strong words, let me add three additional sets of facts: The Christian church’s beginnings, as well as the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition’s ministry focus were the cities. The United States is an urbanized nation. Only 33% of Nazarene churches in the U.S. are in large cities.

Ninevahs are not pleasant places. Certainly not places that God-fearing people would want to visit let alone live with those pagans and cultural misfits. But remember the facts of the Biblical record: A Holy God is concerned about unholy people. A prophetic, missionary message can reach into another culture. Cities can be won; redemption and transformation can take place.

One veteran urban practitioner and educator volunteered a warning: The worse thing a denomination could do is to start something (in urban ministries) that it can't or won't finish.³⁰ As we have seen, the Church of the Nazarene has a record of engaging and disengaging from the city. We need to listen to the wisdom in this warning and make choices accordingly.

Mission Strategy Initiatives

Mission Strategy US/Canada ministry, operating within the department of US-Canada Mission Evangelism remains a ready resource for districts in this urban imperative in two distinct ways.

District Urban Initiative

With a growing recognition that cities represent the epicenter of God’s abiding grace, Mission Strategy has initiated urban strategy workshops with district superintendents and their leadership in an effort to formulate designs for an increased holiness presence. Workshops have been held in Cleveland, Seattle, and Minneapolis.

While the jury is still out on the results of these efforts, it is our conviction that the urban centers represent a harvest of untapped human capital that could be the challenge for decades to come. In Seattle alone, because of the workshop conducted, more than six Hispanic congregations would be started.

In the future Mission Strategy shall continue to partner with districts to develop strategies for launching assaults on cities through:

1. Assessing ministry potential through a SWOT analysis
2. Defining the mission of the district and local congregations
3. Exploring the options available through demographic research
4. Designing a district and local ministry plan

Urban Mission Resource Centers

- Urban Mission Resource Centers

With the increasing stock of church buildings vacated by

urban plight, Mission Strategy would help design strategies to transition these edifices into *Urban Mission Resource Centers*. These buildings would be transformed into centers of comprehensive missional opportunities for the training of urban leaders and the implementation of strategies and programs for urban evangelism.

A UMRC would create its own 501(c) 3, with a board of directors and shall be resourced by funding from a partnership of interested congregations, foundations and state entities. This opportunity could be the catalyst for a NewStart congregation as well as the conduit for urban community organization and development.

UMRC concerns:

Education: Providing education about changing communities, issues concerning urban ministry and ways churches can respond, small church ministry, and other relevant topics.

Research: Providing congregations with practical information about their community, including demographic and sociological analysis. Statistical analysis and interpretation may also be available.

Training: The urban community brings special challenges in interpersonal relationships. The Center will provide education seminars and personal development workshops in the areas of human diversity, racism, reconciliation and relationship issues.

Community Development: The center would be the incubator for the implementation of programs that address the structural barriers that hinder residents from assessing community services and entitlements.

The Urban Imperative is a video and a booklet. Both resources depict the burning need to collectively respond to the challenges and opportunities that the urban mystique presents to the church today.

The Nazarene Centennial Urban Renaissance is a national event being planned for the city of Philadelphia. With the theme of "To the City with Love," the critical objectives of the city plunge are:

- To promote a national event that adds an urban emphasis to the centennial initiative.
- To cooperate with the Philadelphia District to identify inadequately evangelized people groups and to pursue their evangelization.
- To locate Anglo communities in urban areas that have been overlooked and are deprived economically and spiritually and help establish ministry by setting the groundwork to start new churches.
- To demonstrate a denominational commitment to establish a holiness presence in urban areas.
- To equip leaders by conducting workshops and seminars on church-related community development.
- To coordinate the development of an Urban Mission Resource Center to serve the Philadelphia District, and possibly multi-districts.
- To celebrate the accomplishments of national CMC's and GSC's in their outreach to the poor and marginalized.

FOR INDIVIDUAL AND/OR GROUP REFLECTION

1. Conduct a study of the following persons from the Hebrew Scriptures: Joseph, Jonah, Jeremiah, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. What do you learn about the nature of sin, salvation, the role of God's people in cities and the larger society? Can you detect and define any models for urban ministry? Could any of these be adaptable to your city?
2. Review the ministry of Jesus. What was His understanding of the gospel? Of salvation?
3. Study the Acts of the Apostles for examples of how the Early Church ministered in an urban and multicultural world. Did Paul have a single evangelism approach for all the cities? What values, principles, and strategies might apply to 21st-century urban ministry? Note especially Chapters 2, 8, 10, 11, 13, 16-19.
4. From your study of Acts, how does the Early Church understand the role of the Holy Spirit in the missionaries' urban church planting, cross-cultural evangelism, pastoral care, and socio-economic issues of the communities?
5. How does the Early Church view Christ as presented in Colossians? Do you see a different aspect of Christ presented in the book of Philippians? If so, what might these differences mean for our understanding of Christ and salvation? How can these two epistles help us know God more deeply and have a fuller understanding of God's nature and will?
6. How does Paul portray the Church in his letter to the Christians in the city of Ephesus? What imagery, models, or language does he use to describe those who are in Christ? Are there insights from his teaching to this urban church that could help in ministry with your city?

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⁴ "Urbanization," *Reader's Companion to American History*, Houghton Mifflin College Division; available from http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/rcah/html/ah_088600_urbanization.htm; INTERNET.

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⁶ For definitions of these terms and results of research, see Ron Benefiel and Ken Crow, "Fundamentalism in the Church of the Nazarene: A Longitudinal Analysis of Social and Political Values," paper presented to Association of Nazarene Sociologists and Researchers, March 2004; and Linda Beail and Greg Crow, "Wesleyan or Fundamentalist? Political and Theological Stances of Nazarene Pastors," paper presented to Association of Nazarene Sociologists and Researchers, March 2004.

⁷ See <http://www.nazarenecentennial.org>; INTERNET.

⁸ *Articles of Faith and General Rules of the Church of the Nazarene*, October 30, 1895.

⁹ For additional information see David Best, *Successfully Serving the City*.

¹⁰ Oliver Phillips rightly observes the power in a church able to "harness the energies of a combination of these three groups" in *Who Moved My Church: Responding to the Changing Ethnic Landscape*, 28.

¹¹ Ray Bakke, "Apostle to the City," *Christianity Today*, 38.

¹² Martin Luther King, Jr. "The Drum Major Instinct," February 4, 1968.

¹³ Martin Luther King, Jr. "I See the Promised Land," April 3, 1968.

¹⁴ Gustavo Crocker, interview by author, Kansas City, Mo., 27 October 1995.

¹⁵ For more information, see www.UrbanNazarene.org;

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¹⁶ Bob Linthicum, interview by author, Monrovia, Calif., 15 November 1995 .

¹⁷ For more information, see David Best, “Professing Christ and Planting Churches: A Call to the City;” Robert McAfee Brown, *Spirituality and Liberation: Overcoming the Great Fallacy*; Stephen Charles Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change*; Timothy Smith, “A Wesleyan Theology of Salvation and Social Liberation;” Bryan Stone, *Compassionate Ministry: Theological Foundations*.

¹⁸ The Western church has often undertaken its biblical and theological studies through a philosophical lens of dualism. Dualism is found in philosophical systems of various names but inevitably sees the world in two categories: spirit and matter. Regardless the version, dualism must be rejected as unscriptural (and some scientists would now argue also unscientific).

The exact relationship of personal spirituality, Christian community, and social action may ultimately be unfathomable. However, to reduce the inexplicable to a dualism inevitably leads to counterfeit gospel ministry.

¹⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 177

²⁰ John Wesley, vol. 8 of *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1979), 47.

²¹ Timothy Smith, *Nazarenes and the Wesleyan Mission: Can We Learn from Our History?* (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1979), 14.

²² John Wesley, vol. 8 of *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1979), 299.

²³ Kenneth E. Crow, “The Role of Denominational Paradigms in Identity Development,” paper presented to Association of Nazarene Sociologists and Researchers, 1996, available from http://www.nazarene.org/ansr/articles/crow_96a.pdf; INTERNET.

²⁴ Kenneth E. Crow, “The Role of Denominational Paradigms.”

²⁵ Kenneth E. Crow, “The Role of Denominational Paradigms.”

²⁶ Kenneth E. Crow, “The Role of Denominational Paradigms.”

²⁷ Fletcher Tink, “Communicating Christ Cross-culturally,” in *Modular Course of Study*, ed. Michael W. Vail (Kansas City, Mo.: Clergy Services of the Church of the Nazarene, 2002), 7.

²⁸ From shooting script of *Urban Imperative* video. Kansas City, MO: Mission Strategy USA/Canada, 2004

²⁹ *Prism*

³⁰ Robert Linthicum, Interview, 1995