



## “Theologizing” the City in Europe

The unprecedented phenomenon of urbanization since the European Industrial Revolution has gone global, and shows no sign of letting up. Today, more than half of humanity is in, or within the domain of, a city. European Urbanisation is currently over 75% and is predicted to reach 82%.

The Industrial Revolution produced an entirely new urban reality requiring new paradigms for church and mission. Since the end of the Second World War, a new form of the city, the post-industrial, postmodern, globally-connected megacity or global city, is proliferating worldwide. All indicators suggest that this wave of urban expansion represents more than a mere extension of the Industrial Revolution: the emergence of the megacity portends another fundamental metamorphosis in human sociology with its own set of spiritual perils, missiological challenges and opportunities.

Urban missiology in the developed world is woefully out-of-touch and out-of-sync with today's city-builders, each out to create his/her own idea of urban paradise. Inadequate theologies of the city and consequent non-theological understandings of modern urbanization have stifled the growth of urban churches and movements in European cities, and contributed to the demise of urban Christianity.

**Harvie Conn argued:** “Current evangelical discussions, as rich as they are, largely orbit around a missiology of the city more than a theology of the city.... Our missiological vision for the city must also be a theological vision of the city.”

These new urban phenomena require fresh theological reflection, missiological creativity, and united action if Christian mission is to address the unprecedented opportunities, as well as potential new levels and forms of hardship and conflict for city dwellers, generated by the emergence of global

**“Our missiological vision for the city must also be a theological vision of the city.”**  
Harvie Conn

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## EDITORIAL

### The City of our God

*There is a river whose streams  
make glad the city of God,  
the holy place  
where the Most High dwells.  
Psalms 46:4*

Some time ago I stumbled across an article with an intriguing title: “Finding and Analyzing Evil Cities on the Internet”. It was written by security analysts to investigate if it was possible to use IP addresses to not only identify the countries where malicious cyberattacks were originating but also to answer the question “are there cities that are relatively more evil than others?” In case you were wondering their analysis found the most “evil” city in the world was surprisingly Seoul, though when population was taken into account it proved to be the city of Chelyabinsk in Russia!

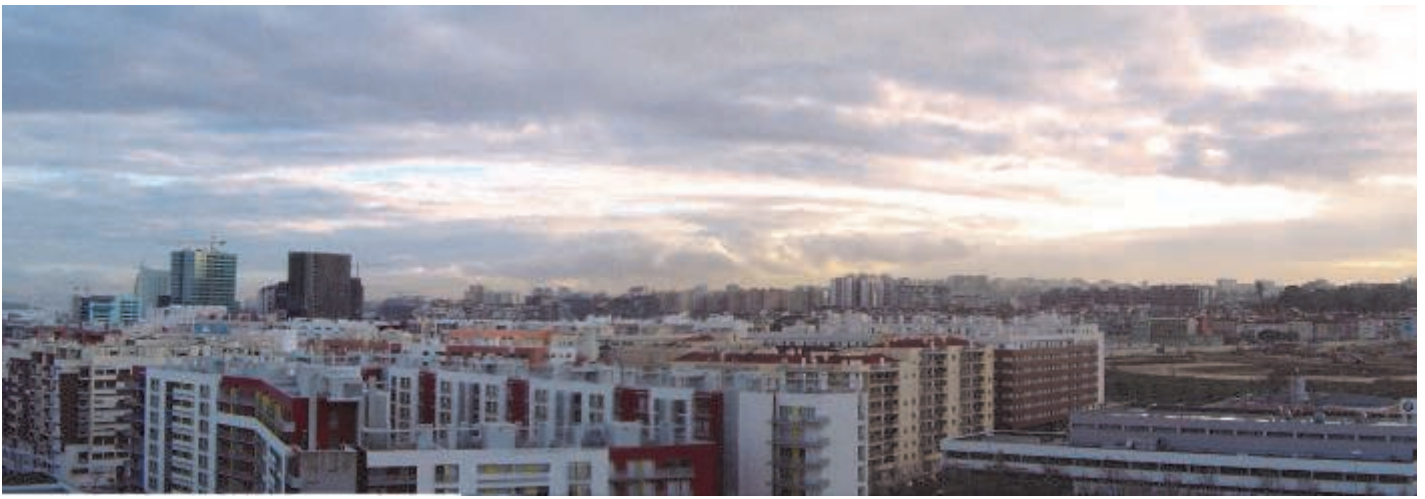
For many Christians cities are inescapably associated with evil. Yet as the Psalmist reminds us the very dwelling place of the Most High is the City of our God.

This issue of Vista deals with the topic of Urbanization in Europe. Yet rather than focus on a detailed analysis of the demographics we have given prominence to two theological treatments of the city. The first, by Ben Beckner calls for a missional theology of the city. The second by Robert Calvert, challenges us to believe again that the gospel is good news for the city. We are grateful to both of them for their call to “theologize” the city in Europe.

Darrell Jackson echoes this theological treatment with evidence of the need for innovative missional approaches. Peter Crawford and Mike Pears are two urban practitioners and their visions of reaching the cities of Lisbon and Bristol make fascinating reading.

And finally, Bibliotheca returns with a review of David Goodhew's important research into Church Growth in Britain.

Jim Memory



The horizon for three out of every four Europeans is dominated by the urban landscape, in this case, Lisbon.

cities. Urban thinkers and actors must give priority to a re-examination of the biblical data with regard to the theological meanings of the city and their significance for Christian mission.

French city theology pioneer Jacques Ellul, in his groundbreaking *The Meaning of the City* (1970), demonstrated that the abundant biblical data with regard to cities - human and divine, temporal and eternal, as places of rebellion and of devotion, as objects of judgment and of blessing - are, in fact, evidences of a well-developed theology of the city. For Ellul this theology seems prophetically intended to aid the church in her understanding and practice of mission during this age of global urbanisation. Ellul is probably the first biblical commentator to truly “theologise” the city *not* as a metaphor of human culture (e.g., in the tradition of Saint Augustine’s *The City of God*, early fifth century), but as a concrete social reality (e.g., in the line of Lewis Mumford’s *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformation, and Its Prospects*, 1961).

Ellul wrote: “We are in the city, and this is one of the most important facts of our generation. It is absolutely indispensable that we realize what that means for us, for our actual life: the undeniable presence and influence of the city are of infinitely greater importance than the urban problem itself.... If the Word of God is clearly marked out for us in our concrete situation, and if at the same time as it takes hold of us (for our condemnation and salvation) it enlightens our understanding of that situation, and if we are truly involved in the city and the Bible shows us what we are in the city for and what the city signifies for us and our relation to her, then all that we have learned should form the proper nucleus for a science of the city.”

It is precisely this spiritual and theological “science of the city,” which is begging to be nourished so that it might mature and bear fruit in the form of a thoroughly biblical and missional theology of the city. Such a theology of the city would be a sufficient foundation on which to build sound urban missiology, allowing for the discovery and development of new paradigms and strategies of mission to Europe’s urban centres.

Such a theology would ensure that the church-in-mission ...

- ... comprehend that the essence of the city is not a random collection of sociological phenomena under purely secular powers, but rather a profoundly spiritual entity - the locus of spiritual powers vying for the souls of men.
- ... rejoice in the knowledge that the Scriptures portray a merciful and loving Creator who progressively takes pains to accommodate man’s insistence on city-building and city-dwelling, sovereignly carving out spaces in cities where his redemptive purposes may operate in the midst of human rebellion and perversion.
- ... marvel at God’s sovereign election of the human city - the very symbol of man’s rejection of God, - as the epicenter of his salvific act in Christ and his ongoing loving actions in human history, and understand that God’s election has resulted in the localization of the conflict of the ages in the world’s cities.
- ... be liberated to be intentionally, proactively, and strategically present in the cities, to engage their inhabitants both intelligently and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

- ... might labour with the assurance that the fruits of mission among redeemed peoples of diverse nations and in their centers of culture, their cities, will have some kind of real continuity in the New Jerusalem, and therefore, have eternal value.

With such a renewed theology, might Christian mission to the global city, as Harvie Conn once conjectured, in fact “provide the contextual instrument for fulfilling David Bosch’s prediction of an emerging paradigm shift in the theology of mission for our day”?

Ben Beckner

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Harvie Conn, 1993, “A Contextual Theology of Mission for the City,” in *The Good News of the Kingdom: Mission Theology for the Third Millennium*, eds. Charles van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland, Paul Pierson, Maryknoll, N, Orbis Books, p. 101.

Ellul, 1970, *The Meaning of the City*, Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, p. 147-148.

Harvie M. Conn, 1994. “Introduction” in *God So Loves the City: Seeking a Theology for Urban Mission*, Charles Van Engen, Jude Tiersma, eds., Monrovia, California, MARC, p. v.

Benjamin Beckner, former urban church planter in several European cities and based in Lyon, France, serves as professor of missiology, missions consultant, trainer and mobiliser for the church in French-speaking Europe.



### Robert Calvert challenges us to participate in God's redemptive work in the cities of Europe

**Did you know Europe's historic cities are only three per cent of the world's land mass, and could comfortably fit inside South Africa?** Nevertheless, European cities have had a disproportionately massive influence on the rest of the world, through both urban history and Christian identity.

#### Urban history

Harvie Conn says two of the four big 'urban waves' began in Europe. In the second urban wave of commercial and feudal cities from the eleventh century, Europe's walled cities gave protection to its citizens and enabled commerce that would takeover the world. In today's fourth wave of global cities, Europe's great metropolitan areas of London, Paris and Berlin are linked. Rotterdam connects the Randstad of the Netherlands to the Rhine-Ruhr of Germany. There are urban corridors between London and Frankfurt and between Milan and Barcelona. Europe's sheer number of multinational companies, banks and organisations suggest it is still a continent of influence, if not inspiration.

#### Christian identity

Crucial points of development in the historic church have been in Europe. Think of Celtic Christianity, monastic mission movements, the Reformation and the World Missionary Conference in 1910, and today of church planting networks, the migration of new Christians and emerging churches.

Today, Europe is made up of about fifty sovereign states (mostly democratic republics), each with their own histories, cultures, languages and a wide spread of Christian traditions. Western Europe (Protestant/mixed) is different from Southern Europe (traditionally Roman Catholic), Nordic Europe (Lutheran), Eastern Europe (Orthodox) and Central Europe (largely atheist). Through migrant Christians, Pentecostalism is everywhere. The contours of Europe's map of faith is not so much being withdrawn as being redrawn.

#### Understanding urban ministry

Today's cities are a dazzling constellation of global cultures, a kaleidoscope that resembles a world atlas. In the urban centres of Europe today, we meet the whole world. There is more Christian ministry going on in them than we usually give credit for, ranging from serving people in pain, developing leadership, community transformation, to church renewal and multiplication.



Photo: European Commission

I believe that:

- Christ is already present in the urban world. We do not bring Christ for the city. Cities have had their share of leaders with messiah complexes. In dark places is God's presence.
- Church is the agent of God's mission in the city. God has not given up on his people, whether local churches or missions, new or old forms, European or African/Asian partners.
- Cities are more of a gift than a problem. The city is a gift of grace. The church is often sick and unhealthy but where hurt and pain is engaged with there is hope of renewal.

Cities are extraordinarily successful and overwhelmingly destructive. David Harvey's recent book "Rebel Cities" is a Marxist critique of urbanism, and although secular, has more zeal for a healthy urban world than do many churches.

Though Europe is home to large numbers of Christians, we do not think spiritually about cities, either blaming them for what is wrong with the world or taking a glossy view that ignores its darker side. Harvey's critique, based on the work of sociologist Robert Park, is that cities are under the control of wealth producers who have dispossessed masses of people to any right to the city. Power is kept in the hands of small political and economic elites who shape the city after their own needs and heart's desires.

Urban mission needs a similar but biblically informed critique if it is not to be condemned

to putting patches on the sores of the broken in the city. Bible-believing Christians are increasingly aware that the Gospel is not only about personal sin and individual salvation, but are still slow to recognise public sin and corporate spirituality.

Lausanne III affirmed that there is a mission to the market place. Recently Dr. Chris Wright spoke about the Lausanne III commitments in the Netherlands and concluded with the urban mission commission. Jeremiah 29:7 says "Seek the peace and prosperity (shalom) of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." I never heard a European evangelical leader speak like that before. So can our broken churches change peoples and cities? This is the Gospel.

#### The Good News redeems people

All people are created in God's likeness and they all need faith and life. We seek deep change. "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." (Romans 12:2) The Gospel is not anti-urban but is transformative of people and worlds. Urban ministry serves and heals, prays and forgives, preaches and teaches, trains and empowers., reaching the parts of people that others (including Marxists) cannot reach.

#### The Good News redeems cities

God cared for Nineveh more than Jonah. Jesus cried over Jerusalem. What are cities but created human institutions and environments? A Church of England bishop recently spoke of his PhD entitled: "Can companies sin?" You can guess the answer!



All human structures are accountable to God and we need to call the city's human service departments to serve the people they were intended for. We must confront principalities and powers through prayer and action. The city longs for human institutions and an urban environment that is liberated to serve. **"Creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the**

glorious freedom of the children of God." (Romans 8:12) Since Christ has overcome Satan, we can confront and call these structures to their true purpose.

References:

1. Harvie M. Conn and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, Downers Grove, IVP, 2001, 33-79.

2. David Harvey, *Rebel Cities*, London, Verso, 2012.

3. Urbanization is about the density of people whereas urbanism is about the values of the city. Urbanization has reduced space but urbanism has recreated it. Urbanization has condensed space but urbanism has conveyed it across the world.

4. **"In 2010, 73% of Europeans live in urban areas. 72% of these urbanites adhere to Christianity. 49% of the fifty largest European areas have Christian majorities."** Todd M. Johnson, Kenneth R. Ross, eds., *Atlas of Global Christianity*, Centre for Study of Global Christianity, Edinburgh University, 2009, 248.

Robert Calvert

Robert Calvert is minister of Scots International Church Rotterdam with more than forty nationalities. Over the decade he has co-ordinated a European network for urban ministry practitioners. Robert organizes consultations and trails, supervises student placements and teaches on urban ministry.



## INNOVATION, MISSION AND THE CITIES OF EUROPE

Darrell Jackson sees opportunities for missional innovation in the cities of Europe

In global terms there are only three Metropolitan areas in Europe that rank **among the world's top twenty, ranked** by size. Moscow, London and Köln make it in at 15<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> respectively. The largest metropolitan area in the world, Tokyo, is almost three times the size of London. London is outranked by at least ten mega-cities from the global south (including Jakarta, Manilla, and Mumbai).

Using a slightly different set of criteria for **measuring the size of Europe's cities**, the emergence of various centres has been traced historically and is shown in the table (Figure 1).

Despite the jostling in the rankings, it remains true that many European cities which fail to achieve the global lists are nevertheless influential at a global level. London and Frankfurt play vital roles in the global economy, whilst cities like Brussels are

important as centres of regional and global politics.

European cities are also important at a global level because their cultural and ethnic diversity ensures they are tangibly linked to multiple cities around the globe. Family, business, and personal ties are vital to sustaining the highly networked experience of large numbers of European cities. Furthermore, the diversity of cities scattered across Europe, in a variety of political and social contexts, means that European policy-makers have a variety of settings that they use to observe various patterns of social integration and social cohesion.

Obviously, the ethnic and cultural diversity has also become a feature of European **Christianity**. By far the majority of Europe's ethnic minority congregations have been planted in its major cities over the last fifty to sixty years or so.

The mushrooming of Christian congregations from the global south, scattered across the cities of Europe, has not gone unnoticed by European policy makers. The Council of **Europe has its 'Cities for Local Integration Policy' (CLIP)**. This 200 page report, produced in August 2010, devoted 28 pages to a discussion of meeting religious needs, responding to religious radicalisation, and encouraging religious groups to talk to one another. The report argues that the largest group of religious migrants is the Islamic community and tends to give them the most attention.

**It's vital that the Christian community in Europe works with migrant Christian groups** in order to demonstrate that they are frequently overlooked in urban centres. It may be that they are less vocal. It may be that their close relationships with existing European churches means that their needs are less evident to the Council of Europe or

the EU. However, urgent work is needed to give a more accurate representation of the religious identity of migrants in Europe (including the intra-EU migrants, many of whom would register as 'Christian').

What the work of CLIP also demonstrates is a growing recognition that it's equally important to pay attention to the medium-sized cities of Europe. Paul Hildreth has done work for the Evangelical mission community in the UK and in 2006 was commissioned by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to prepare a report on medium-sized cities and their contribution to regional and national economies.

He developed a typology of medium-sized cities which builds on their location and their traditional 'industries'. He talks about:

- industrial cities: with one or more dominant industrial sectors.
- gateway cities: providing international connections, whether physical or digital.
- heritage or tourism cities: attracting national and/or international visitors.
- university knowledge cities: containing top-performing universities with the capacity to innovate.
- cities in a large or capital city-region: benefitting from a physical connection or proximity to a capital or large-city region.
- regional service cities: supplying employment opportunities, retail and other services to the wider region.

He observes that in the EU, over 60% of the population lives in urban areas of over 50,000 people, many of which can be

classified as medium-sized cities. He adds that 'there is a general trend to devolve responsibilities from national governments to regional and local levels, with an increasing appreciation of the importance of cities to regional and national economies.'

Christianity Today (CT) published an article in 2010 that made reference to the fact that in 2008, half the world's population was living in cities. The UN estimates that by 2050, almost 70 percent of the world population (an estimated 10 billion) will be living in cities. The article quoted Doug McConnell, dean of the School of Intercultural Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, 'As the escalation of global urbanization has taken place, so has the urbanization of mission work.'

The CT article also makes reference to that fact that in 2008, the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptists began to accelerate its cities policy, based on ongoing urban research. Interestingly in 2007, the UN had produced its own research report on religion and the worlds' cities. *The State of World Population 2007* noted that 'Rapid urbanisation was expected to mean the triumph of rationality, secular values and the demystification of the world, as well as the relegation of religion to a secondary role. Instead, there has been a renewal in religious interest in many countries. Increased urbanisation, coupled with slow economic development and globalisation, has helped to increase religious diversity,' the report notes. 'Rather than revivals of a tradition, the new religious movements can be seen as adaptations of religion to new circumstances.'



The Shard in London, currently Europe's tallest building

The combined sense one gains from this range of commentators, Christian and secular, is that opportunities abound for innovation in missional attempts to reach Europe's cities. The creativity of the cities themselves is being mirrored in the new ways of being missional that Christian agencies and churches are adopting.

Darrell Jackson

Figure 1: The Ten largest cities in Europe in 1000, 1400, 1700, 1900 and 2010

	1000		1400		1700		1900		2009/12
Cordoba	450,000	Paris	275,000	Constantinople	700,000	London	6,480,000	Istanbul	8,803,468
Constantinople	450,000	Milan	125,000	London	550,000	Paris	3,330,000	London	7,668,300
Seville	90,000	Bruges	125,000	Paris	530,000	Berlin	2,424,000	Berlin	3,460,725
Palermo	75,000	Venice	110,000	Naples	207,000	Vienna	1,662,000	Madrid	3,213,271
Kiev	45,000	Granada	100,000	Lisbon	188,000	St Petersburg	1,439,000	Rome	2,743,796
Venice	45,000	Genoa	100,000	Amsterdam	172,000	Manchester	1,255,000	Paris	2,181,374
Regensburg	40,000	Prague	95,000	Rome	149,000	Birmingham	1,248,000	Bucharest	1,942,254
Thessalonika	40,000	Caffa	85,000	Venice	144,000	Moscow	1,120,000	Hamburg	1,786,448
Amalfi	35,000	Seville	70,000	Moscow	130,000	Glasgow	1,072,000	Budapest	1,721,556
Rome	35,000	Ghent	70,000	Milan	124,000	Liverpool	940,000	Warsaw	1,709,781

Sources: Chandler and Fox, 3000 Years of Urban Growth, New York, NY: Academic Press, 1974 and Eurostat:

<http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tgs00079&plugin=1>

# BIBLIOTHECA

In Britain, as in much of Europe, the popular belief is that Christianity is in decline. A recent book by David Goodhew, Director of Ministerial Practice at Cranmer Hall, Durham, takes on the secularization thesis with solid evidence of church growth in many parts of Britain over the last 30 years.



Former Methodist Chapel in Birmingham, now a Carpet Warehouse.

It is a widely accepted fact that Christianity in Britain is in terminal decline. The dominant narrative is that widespread secularization is leading inevitably towards, in the words of social historian Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*.

A new book on *Church Growth in Britain, 1980 to the Present*, edited by David Goodhew, Director of Ministerial Practice at Cranmer Hall, Durham (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012) challenges that assumption. The volume is “a mosaic of micro-studies” giving fourteen examples of church growth in denominations and local congregations from across Britain.

Rather than approaching the subject through national and regional statistics of church membership and attendance, Goodhew has looked at church growth “from below”, that is, from the perspective of the local congregation. His book is a powerful challenge to the “hegemonic meta-narrative of secularization”, that local congregations in Britain are in steep decline.

Goodhew comes to the following conclusions:

- The Christian church in London is growing both in absolute terms and as a proportion of the population.

- Most “mainline” denominations have experienced decline but not all, the Baptists having remained more-or-less stable. Weekday worship at Anglican Cathedrals has mushroomed as has involvement in certain Anglican networks such as New Wine.
- Black and other ethnic minority churches have experienced sustained growth in recent decades but have made only limited impact on mainline churches and on the majority population.
- Church planting and other new forms of church are enjoying substantial growth, yet they are glaringly absent from many statistical studies.

The secularization narrative is shown to be a gross simplification. A much more complex picture emerges as one takes into account these hitherto marginalized stories of church growth. Goodhew concludes: “British churches are experiencing both decline and growth. Britain has grown more secular and more religious in the last 30 years”.

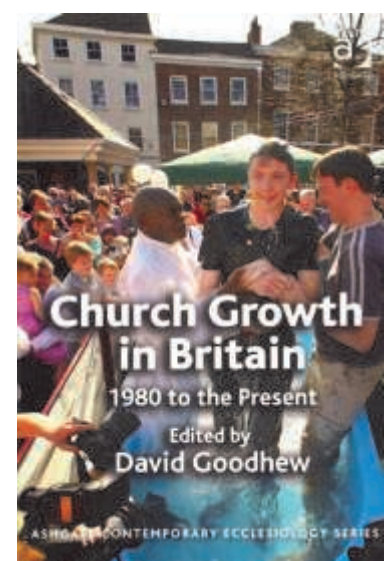
Observing the paradox that, in the recent Census, Londoners were the least likely to describe themselves as “Christian” of any region in Britain, yet London’s churches are growing faster than anywhere else in the

country, it follows that “a country or city can, at the same time, grow more secular by one measure and less secular by another”.

Though the focus of this volume is self-consciously British, these observations may prove to be applicable across Europe. However, when Goodhew suggests that Britain “straddles the religious divide between the secularity of, say Sweden and the robust religiosity of Ghana” he makes the same mistake that he has been so keen to point out in other treatments of church growth in Britain. Are there not stories of striking church growth “from below” to be told in Sweden? Would not an equally rigorous treatment of Swedish churches, both historic and new, evidence a similar situation of simultaneous growth and decline.

However this merely illustrates Goodhew’s wider point, that “we should cease thinking in terms of a zero-sum game in which society is either becoming more secular or more religious. Rather, parts of Britain and parts of society and culture are growing more secular and other parts are growing less secular”. His comment on Sweden shows just how hard it is to uproot this way of thinking. Yet this is a message that missiologists and church leaders across Europe would do well to heed.

Jim Memory



Church Growth in Britain: 1980 to the Present, ed. David Goodhew, Farnham: Ashgate, 2012

## URBAN MISSION IN EUROPE: TALES FROM TWO CITIES

**Peter Crawford (ECM) and Mike Pears (Urban Expressions) share their visions of mission in Europe's cities.**

### Lisbon: A City Undiscovered

A couple of years back, the Mastercard advert in the arrivals hall of Lisbon Airport ran something like this "Discover the city that discovered half the world: Priceless". And therein lies the enigma of this great European capital.

During the age of the great oceanic voyages of discovery of the 16th Century, Lisbon was poised, as it were, on the western edge of the world, strategically situated to benefit massively from all the global trade that the age of discoveries produced. The Mastercard advert was not hyperbole. This city really did discover half the world. But now the oceans are no longer a superhighway, and this southwest corner of Europe has become something of an economic backwater. Lisbon waits to be discovered again.

Fast forward to 1989. The mood is buoyant after half a century of repressive dictatorship, and now with entry into the EU and a period of relative political stability, the stage is set for Lisbon to host a great International Trade Fair, a move which resulted in the creation of Park of the Nations, popularly called EXPO, a shining brand new residential and commercial district along the north bank of the Rio Tejo.

It is hard to think, two decades on, how much that mood has changed, with the current austerity measures, rising unemployment and the emigration of young professionals to greener pastures beyond **Portugal's frontiers. However, Park of the Nations** retains an air of clean bright optimism, a haven of relative prosperity, and continues to be a sought after address for the upwardly mobile. It has come to **symbolize the aspirations of today's Portuguese. That's why ECM considered it** a strategic location for a new church planting initiative in 2005. The key ingredients have been a collaborative approach (the church plant team comprised ECM, JMM of Brazil and a local Baptist Church), the use of short term volunteers, an approach to outreach that is contextualized to the felt needs of the community, and a worship format that is contemporary with a strong focus on mission. In a rich neighborhood like this, the felt needs are expressed more in terms of family and relational dysfunction rather than economic or social needs. And, of course, a lot of prayer.



Typical of this demographic is Ana, a young architect with two small children. She began bringing them regularly to a weekly **childrens' activity that the small church had begun in the park.** There was nothing explicitly evangelistic - no singing, no Bible stories, **but Ana told us later "It was the love you showed for each other that attracted me, at first, and you kept talking about Jesus. I just had to know more..."** In fact, when it comes to developing a strategic approach, God often works, if not in spite of our strategy, then at least in ways we had hardly even dreamed of. Over 7 years, the average attendance has grown to between 40 and 50 and the church, now meeting in a local school auditorium, is poised to be established with its own autonomous board.

Meanwhile over on the other side of the city, other urban church plants are coming into being. Currently a number of church and mission leaders are meeting and praying together about developing a church planting network for Lisbon that will bridge denominational boundaries. With 25% of the total population of the country (10.5 million) concentrated in and around the greater metropolitan area of the city of Lisbon, the city represents a huge mission field. *Missão Global 2015* an initiative launched by the Portuguese Evangelical Alliance in 2004 with the support of DAWN ministries, recognizes the need to see a significant number of new churches planted in the greater Lisbon area in order **to reach its stated goal: "A church accessible to every person throughout this land, in this generation"**.

It may seem an enormous challenge, but as the city waits to be discovered afresh for the 21st century, a great opportunity exists

for further concentration of new resources, prayers and cooperation between churches and missions, which could help Lisbon discover the glorious, healing and transforming grace of God

Peter Crawford  
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*Peter Crawford is currently National Director for ECM in Portugal. For the past five years, he and his wife Anna have been helping plant "A Ponte" (Comunidade Baptista Parque das Nações) in Park of the Nations, Lisbon. With his previous 18 years working in Pakistan, Peter is also currently coordinating the development of ministry among Muslim for ECM in Europe.*



Bristol: What we have learned so far

My involvement in urban ministry started almost 30 years ago when my wife and I moved into an extensive area of high-rise developments in Peckham (S.E. London)—an area characterised by violence and what was beginning to be labelled the 'under-class'—to re-plant a closing Baptist church. Twenty five years on and two cities later we find ourselves living in a **large 'white estate' on the edge of Bristol.** Like many such estates around the U.K., **ours was built in the 1930's as a slum** clearance from the east of the city and suffers from chronic multiple deprivations.

In our experience, urban life has changed in a number of significant and important

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ways over the last three decades. City centres have been largely regenerated and the standard of services available for many has improved. Alongside improvements there is however a dark underside. Poorer communities have, where possible, been moved away from city centres and the gulf between rich and poor has grown almost unchecked, to what can only be called obscene levels.

**Whilst Bristol is the UK's wealthiest city** outside of London in terms of personal average income, it maintains large areas of deprivation where the common experience of many is that they are unable to afford enough food to eat or energy to heat their homes. A baby born in our neighbourhood is likely to face such complex challenges – including disadvantages to their health and mental and emotional development – that they face severe obstacles to finding what most people in Bristol would consider the



Knowle West, Bristol

minimum requirements for a reasonable life.

We are part of a network of small groups who have moved to live long term in the most deprived 10% of the city. We find ourselves being deeply challenged in a few critical areas, perhaps most significantly how **to be 'present'**. I'm not talking here primarily about evangelism as such or spending time with those who are **interested in 'coming to church', nor setting up projects to help those in need** – as worthy as these things are. For us it is about putting aside the expectancy of running things and instead to seek to nurture Christian community that is able to live patiently and attentively amongst those who find themselves bewildered, lonely and vulnerable. It is about taking time to be with people, to get to know their names, listen to their stories and be known as someone who can be trusted. It is about not expecting anything in return; not demanding that lives have to change or that they join in what we do.

This kind of presence is to do with incarnation, characterised for us by the parable of the woman kneading dough (Matt

13:33). Leaven that once lost in the dough cannot be extracted again, is not visible or high-profile, but is bashed around in the process of kneading so that the only way you can tell it is there at all is when the whole batch rises and is ready to bake.

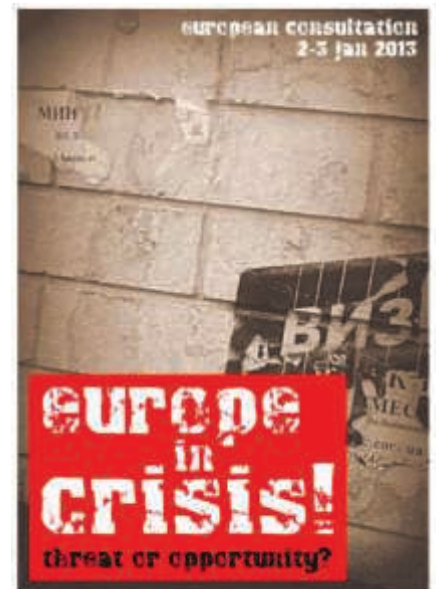
We are finding that this kind of simple presence is far from easy! To avoid burn out and isolation, it needs a careful nurturing from those who bring mature and sensitive support. It demands that we are attentive to our own inner lives and are prepared for an uncompromised following of Jesus to deal with our own prejudices, insecurities, loneliness and prickliness. It means that we need to learn our own limitations and realise that we cannot be the answer to everyone and everything. We have needed to re-learn Sabbath and sabbatical, the necessity of quiet space with Jesus as well as leisure **and fun so that we don't get consumed** by a sense of our own importance.

Presence is a critical challenge for the wider church in our city. Yes, there are scores of amazing Christians of all ages who work in both professional and voluntary capacities with those who are vulnerable and marginalised. However, a vast majority of Christians in Bristol live in, and attend church in secure middle-class areas. There is an urgent need for the church in the city to shift the centre of gravity of its presence towards the margins. The prophetic call on the church is to create an alternative imagination of life in the city by gathering together in peaceable relationships where Jesus is central, so that the stranger and alien in our city are embraced. I am convinced that such a community would radically subvert the settlements of power that characterise urban life, settlements that continue to keep the city divided and are the reason for an ever widening gap between the haves and have-nots.

Mike Pears  
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