A Reflection on the Uniqueness of Urban Ministry

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Urban religious life expresses itself like a garden in the tropics, watered by the intensity of human need and excess, and proliferating in thousands of different forms, some as weeds, some as vegetables and some as flowers, and some that cross categories or are beyond categorizing. Regardless, the energies and expressions of religion appear in countless ways.

Urban ministry, done by Christians with Biblical intent, too, shares in this variety. As such it both is an expression of its urban context and a power that seeks to cope with, and/or change that urban context. As such it is perilous to try to make generalizations about the nature of urban ministry. However, one dares to suggest that urban ministry, if not qualitatively different from other ministries, responds to its varied contexts quite differently, in form, content and, at times, meaning.

Roger Greenway has suggested that there are three kinds of ministry in the City: “parish” ministry which seeks to minister to a geographically identified community, believing its mission to minister to all interested peoples in that community. This means that the symbol of Church is also a community symbol, and that the unity of the fellowship is held together by ritual and symbol on the one hand, and a plethora of contextualized ministries on the other.

The second form of ministry, he identifies as “demographic” ministry, that is, it identifies a particular homogeneous population group (homogeneous being not just race, ethnicity, language and age sets, but also, lifestyle preferences, interests, needs, etc.). This form of ministry, hopefully, is used to reach “unreached” groupings, and is not redundant to the parish ministry. It can contextualize its message and methods more thoroughly than can the parish model, and tailor its symbols to a particular people. Its appeal is often less local and more regional.

The third form of ministry, Greenway identifies as “systemic” ministry, that is, that it understands the systemic structures of the urban context and seeks not just to pull people into the ministry, but to empower them for ministry within the systems that hold society together. This is done, for the most part, poorly, as ministers and churches neither view their societies through these lenses, nor express much capability in understanding how to train people to minister in this fashion, or to engage in a world beyond the four walls of the church.

Urban ministry then cannot be reduced to formulized generalizations. However, unlike small town or rural ministries, we can say that the urban context may confront us with complexity, change, diversity, secularization, sheer numbers of problems and potentials, reduced controls, more “in-your-face” seductions and temptations, management issues, and relationships built around practicality and marketing rather than genetics and histories.

Here is the challenge, to take the integrity of the Gospel, and negotiate it through the urban grid and still find vibrant and vital meaning not just to the individual but to the community. When one despairs, often, that is when the Holy Spirit kicks in to contextualize and appropriate the message in evermore creative ways.