

# **Chapter 8**

## **The challenges ahead**

It is a serious mistake that the mission of the church is absorbed only in the internal ministries and its existence. In such case, direction of the church will be self-focused and marginal to the life of the city. Evangelism will be unconsciously degenerated to new membership recruitment and the foci of pastoral ministries will be narrowed to the sustaining of church members and offering from the congregation. In the light of urban mission, there is a decisive discovery for Kei To that the final target is not the church itself but the city in favor of God. It has inspired Kei To to re-orient its mission and to walk in the right direction. Facing the future development, there are three challenges ahead. The first is the need for a solid biblical theology of the city. The second is the need for urban compassion. The Third is the need for building up network for effective urban mission.

### **The need for a solid biblical theology of the city**

In Hong Kong churches, there are all kinds of urban ministries but void of the thinking of urban mission. This is due to the fact that Hong Kong churches are generally lacking a solid biblical theology of the city. City is generally defined as a place with huge number of population. Thus it is often taken in the context that churches may have many chances to reach the people for the sake of evangelism and church growth. The basic tone is largely set on increasing church membership. So there is the most important challenge ahead of anchoring the Hong Kong churches in the correct biblical theology of the city.

To meet this challenge, three targets have to be achieved. The first is to rediscover “city” a neglected theme that requires us to think much of it. Traditionally, Chinese churches talk about the Kingdom of God and People of God in terms of the church, heaven and eternal life as the main themes of the eschatological hope. But the city of God is seldom discussed as an important aspect of faith.

Moreover, there is the anti-city bias in people’s mind. City is full of cursing by nature. For example, Abraham originally was an urbanite. He was called to leave the prosperous city Ur to the Promised Land. He completely changed his life style from a settler to a wanderer. Such a change kept him close to God

and he received the blessing not inside the city. Whereas, his nephew Lot chose to live in the city of Sodom, where he even attained a high status. (See Genesis 13:10-13, 19:1) But eventually he was urged to leave this city in order to escape the cursing and punishment from God. Another example is King David. Before he became the King of Israel, he was a shepherd with good spirituality. But after he entered the capital city of Jerusalem, his spirituality deteriorated. He committed a great sin in adultery and made a trap to murder a righteous man. Obviously a conclusion may be drawn that good men should not live in the city, or should make a compromise to live in the suburb while working in the city. Is this a biblical conclusion?

Actually city is an important theme that the word “city” appears 1227 times in the Bible (RSV). In this theme we can see that the city is also a symbol of goodness. God set up cities of refugees where God’s justice would prevail. (See Joshua 20) In the book of great prophet, Isaiah prophesied that the people of Israel would be restored to the city called “the city of the Lord”. (See Isaiah 60:9-14) Even in the time of captivity, Jeremiah wrote letter to his fellow Israelites in Babylon to encourage them to pray for the peace of the city so that they could also be protected in peace. (See Jeremiah 29:5-7) The Psalmist appreciated the goodness of the city which was a blessing to the wanderer in the wilderness. (See Psalm 107:4-8) The city of Jerusalem was the holy habitation of the Most High. (See Psalm 46:4) In the New Testament, the writer of the Hebrews interpreted the hope and the faith of Abraham in terms of the city in heaven. Abraham looked not for a “garden of Eden,” but a “city whose builder and maker is God.” (See Hebrews 11:8-16) In Revelation, apostle John saw the Bride, the wife of the Lamb, as the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. (See Revelation 21:9-10)

The paradoxical nature of the city implies that it can bring out the worst in man and also it can bring great glory to God. The key point is who rules in the city and makes the systems to ensure the power of man is executed in a proper way in favor before God. Babylon and Sodom were cities ruled by Satan as the places of shame. Whereas the New Jerusalem in future is the city ruled by God as the place of glory. The city is the eternal battleground between God and Satan.<sup>1</sup> The urban church, in understanding this biblical theme, takes up the role of a messenger for the city of God to prepare the way of the Lord.

The second target is to recognize that the city has a corporate personality. As a common and general impression, a city is just a place where people you minister live or the church in which you worship God is situated. It is just a collection of individuals to whom missionaries were supposed to minister. Can we minister "a city" just as we minister individuals within the city? Is a city a proper theological entity that

can be addressed just like a person?

Cities are more than mere collections of individuals. Jesus seemed to see cities as theological entities that could be condemned for their hard-hearted unbelief even in front of His teaching and miracles. This can be seen in the following scripture:

“Woe to you, Chora'zin! woe to you, Beth-sa'ida! for if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it shall be more tolerable in the judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Caper'na-um, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades.” (RSV Luke 10: 13-15, also see Matthew 11:20-25)

Jesus talked to Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum and He talked about Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom that the cities themselves, as entities, would be judged on the Day of Judgment. In other words, it would be a corporate punishment for corporate sin according to the corporate response to the gospel. So cities have definite corporate identity, definite corporate response to the gospel, definite corporate accountability, definite personality, and definite spirituality in God's eyes. This corporate personality reflects in the power systems, leadership and cultural lifestyle. Jerusalem is both the eternal city and the place where the gospel and God are most decisively rejected. Babylon "the great" represented worldliness that led it to become a howling wasteland. Bethel was the place where Jacob's ladder was and where angels ascended and descended. Rome was the harlot city which persecuted the saints but paradoxically was also the place where the gospel finally took root and prospered. Sodom represented a city living in extravagance and completely given to all forms of wickedness especially sexual perversion and slavery. Recognizing this corporate character of the city will help us define urban ministries as Dr. Bakke said:

If the Bible teaches that cities are important beyond the fact that they are collections of individuals, then our ministries in cities must both be public and private, personal and corporate.

The Old Testament is not silent on the role of religious leaders of God's people in urban context.....However, even superficial study reveals that the concept of ministry in Israel, stemming from cities that symbolize a measure of corporate solidarity, was far more varied than we might otherwise have supposed.

How is it that the New Testament disciples became urban disciples? One way was by reading examples of

ministry in urban contexts in the Old Testament itself. Israel leaders did more than just “preach the gospel”.<sup>2</sup>

The third target is to know God’s basic agendas of the city in the Bible. In the process of urbanization, most urban ministries are responses to historical problems and contemporary issues in the context of the city. Many urban workers lose touch of the agendas and the eschatological hope of the city. As a result they easily get burnt out in the ministries. God’s basic agendas, like the North Star, give us a clear direction in the bottomless needs of the city.

To discern God's agendas for the city is to be aware of how the process of contextualization influences (or should influence) our interpretation of the Scriptures. There are three contexts: Bible original context, Bible reader personal context and the contemporary context that may influence our exegesis of the Scriptures about cities. In fact to determine whether God’s agenda is relevant to our cities is not an easy job. But I agree with Dr. Bakke that in discovering and reflecting on the biblical theology for the city, we must keep the very basic themes in balance. Dr. Bakke proposes that there are ten tensions coming out of the pages of the Scripture. These tensions are:<sup>3</sup>

1. Creation and redemption
2. Truth and love
3. Individual and community
4. Local and global
5. Unity and diversity
6. Power and powerless
7. Certainty and mystery
8. Commission and commandment
9. Past and future
10. Work and rest

### **The need for urban compassion**

There is not only the need for the biblical theology in Hong Kong churches, but also the need for urban compassion. Though living in the urban context, there is not necessarily a heart for the city. Though grown up in the process of urbanization, Kei To, in the same way, did not have the urban compassion in

the past thirty years. From 1999 to 2002, the greatest barrier in Kei To in launching the urban mission was the lack of this urban heart and this urban mind. Without urban compassion, there will be hardly any intention or motivation to discover what the Bible says about the city.

After I had translated Dr. Bakkes' book "A Theology as Big as the City" in 2001, I shared my learning about urban mission with some leaders in Hong Kong churches. We had the same burden to meet regularly to pray for our city, to search God's agendas for Hong Kong, and to encourage Hong Kong churches to get the breakthrough similar to Kei To in acquiring the compassion for the city. We decided to establish a new organization "Urban Compassion"<sup>4</sup> to meet these needs. On 21 January 2002, a seminar was jointly organized by "Hong Kong Church Renewal Movement", "The Urban Peacemaker Evangelistic Fellowship", "Hong Kong District Committee of Chinese Coordination Center of World Evangelization", "International Ren Ai Foundation", "China Alliance Press" and "Christian Times". Over one hundred and thirty church leaders and pastors attended the afternoon seminar and nearly three hundred lay Christians attended the evening meeting. In the afternoon seminar and the evening meeting, Dr. Philemon Choi, the general secretary of "Breakthrough", was the main speaker. He delivered powerful message to all the participants. They were challenged to reflect on the mandate of the church in the light of urban mission and they discussed together the pastoral direction of how to support Christians in their involvement in social witness for the city.<sup>5</sup>

On 1 July 2002, the fifth anniversary of Hong Kong's return to Mainland China, there were many activities to celebrate Hong Kong's smooth implementation of "one country two systems" in the past five years. This was also the time the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, Mr. Tung, commenced his second term of office in the Special Administrative Region. "Urban Compassion" chose that day to express our Christian hopes for Hong Kong in future. We wrote the "Manifesto of 1 July 2002: Urban witness in holistic concern and neighbor caring" and published it in the Mingpao Daily, one of the popular Chinese newspapers in Hong Kong. Through this manifesto, we hope to arouse the churches and the Christians in Hong Kong to the call for urban compassion. The content of the manifesto is recorded below:<sup>6</sup>

### **Manifesto of 1 July 2002: Urban witness in holistic concern and neighbor caring**

Hong Kong has reverted to Mainland China under the "one country and two systems" for five years since 1997. We Christians are here to affirm the positive side of Hong Kong's return to China. In these five

years, we still enjoy the freedom of speech, the freedom of press and the freedom of religion. Churches still faithfully deliver services as in the past years. Christians increasingly use the mass media to spread the message of faith, of hope and of love. At the same time Christians are also increasingly alert to the negative influences of the mass media and have voiced out biblical standing to protect the culture from corruption. We have witnessed our faith in the social dimension and got certain good results. Based on the biblical faith for the city, and what we have done in the past, now we would like to shape the future of Hong Kong to be a city having a spiritual mind, a neighborhood community with mutual help and a family member in our mother country China. As the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region is entering the second five years, we undertake the following commitments:

1. To keep Christian communities attentive to the challenges in today's situation. Now Hong Kong is facing a high unemployment rate and an increasing number of suicides, broken families and addicted gamblers. We will base ourselves on the faith of holistic care for the society to cultivate a healthy social heart and mind, to consolidate peaceful relationships in families, and to construct a society in truth, goodness, and loveliness.
2. To establish a network with all sectors in Hong Kong. Through this networking, we serve the vulnerable and the families in crisis, to build Hong Kong into a city of love with social righteousness. Each member of this city can live in dignity and lead a joyful life.
3. To firmly hold on to the identity of Chinese, the special condition of "one country and two systems" and the status of an international city. We will make contributions to our homeland China, whether serving in Hong Kong, in the Mainland or overseas. We hope China will develop in a proper and healthy way through our best efforts in glorifying the Highest God.

"Urban Compassion" is a small organization but we have the difficult mandate of renewing the mission of the churches for the city. The changes in Kei To have given us many insights that can be of useful reference to other churches in going through the process of renewal in church mission. Apart from that, there is another important dimension of urban compassion. This is the third challenge of the need for networking for effective ministries.

### **The need for networking for effective ministries**

Networking is not a new thing to the Hong Kong churches. In Hong Kong we have many associations and

networks among Christian communities and organizations. The real challenge lies with the concept of the relationship between the sacred and the secular. Traditionally, the teaching of apostle Paul in the Scripture influences us:

“Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership have righteousness and iniquity? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Be'lial? Or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, 'I will live in them and move among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.' (RSV 2 Corinthians: 6:14-18)

Under this teaching of no partnership with the unbelievers, how can urban mission justify to make network with government departments or other social service organizations without Christian faith? In every day life, actually we cannot avoid any link with unbelievers and definitely we have corporate relationships with non-Christians in our workplace. The teaching of Paul just reminds us that in the realm of redemption of Jesus Christ, there is no fellowship, no partnership nor networking between Christians and unbelievers. But this does not exclude cooperation and linkage between the two parties in the realm of creation order or in the realm of common grace.

In this world, there are two cities: city of Jerusalem and city of Babylon, mingled together to form the paradoxical picture of the wheat and weed growing together in the field. Before the Day of Judgment, members of the two cities mix together. Members of both the city of God and the earthly city will be among the citizens of the nations on earth. Surely members of the two cities have different ultimate values but they have many intermediate ends in common. For example they both desire for peace and health in the society. In the realm of soteriology, networking is only for believers. But in the realm of creation, all men are enjoying the common grace and share the same hopes and intermediate ends in life and the living environment. Networking between believers and unbelievers is allowed and justified. In the light of the mingling of the two cities, the church on one hand is not of the secular city having her mandate to be holy. But on the other hand, the church is for the secular city, having the mission as the change agent to realize the city of God in this age until the time for total consummation. If the church abandons the mission to be a change agent in the secular cities, how the church can be salt and light? Actually networking in urban mission is working under this tension, balancing between creation and redemption.

The other issue of networking in Hong Kong is the problem of lacking a strategy. Many networks come about spontaneously from issues or grow from the need for mutual support in the same ministry and denomination. Dr. Philemon Choi first proposed a strategic networking for Hong Kong churches and Christians in the Hong Kong evangelist convention 2001.<sup>7</sup> He suggested a three-level networking that could address the city in a holistic way. The first is the policy-making level in the structure of government. There are many Christians working in the government as policy makers, members of consultative committees, or legislative councilors. Up to now, there is no networking at this level to facilitate Christians to be a prophet voicing out for God in the governmental system.

The second level is the cultural and community level. This is the networking of local churches in different districts, the Christian organizations in different functions and Christian professionals in different fields.

There are the following five areas that networking can serve and make contributions.

1. Media and culture: counter culture or culture redemption
2. Education renewal and reformation: especially in the field of information technology
3. Social Welfare: consolidation of families and community building
4. Health: holistic health and holistic healing
5. Commercial and industry: formation of value and hope, and witness in the Mainland.

The third is the individual facilitation level. This is the networking of local churches, Christian organizations and theological seminaries. The purpose of this networking is to facilitate individual Christian holistically in the following aspects:

1. Creating space and retreat for personal growth in spirituality, in mind and in physical body.
2. Affirmation of self-identity in spiritual dimension, cultural dimension, and national dimension for self-development.
3. Equipping and mentoring of believers to be holy priests in the workplace.

It is wonderful that the networking strategy of Dr. Choi coincides with Dr. Bakke's as expounded in his chapter of "The Persian partnership for the rebuilding of Jerusalem".<sup>8</sup> The first level networking is the role of Esther, making influences on the laws within the government structure. The second level is the role of Nehemiah, making contribution in community building and cultural redemption by servanthood leadership. The third level is the role of Ezra, making contribution in personal growth, spiritual formation and spiritual resources (the Holy temple) for ministries.



In the Hong Kong situation, there are the second level and the third level networking among local churches, Christian organizations, seminaries and Christians, but lacking the first level networking. Frankly speaking, many Hong Kong churches still hold on to the position that the church and the state should be absolutely separated. At the same time, Hong Kong churches lack a public theology for Christians to face the ethics in public issues. Many Christians participating in politics or public affairs feel lonely without support from their churches. “Urban Compassion” is concerned about this situation and looks forward for making some contributions at this level of networking.

## **Conclusion**

As Dr. Bakke said:

“At first I thought that if pastor had good information and motivation, they could bring renewal to city churches and transform persons and places. I was wrong. By 1989 it is clear to me by “quick and dirty” surveys in some fifty cities (just Second- and Third-World) that 85 to 90 percent of all major barriers to effective ministry are not in our cities at all – they are inside our churches.”<sup>9</sup>

I agree with what Dr. Bakke said when I went through the process of this MR Project. Firstly, the barrier is my theological beliefs and my experience. As Chinese, the self-centric mind is unconsciously hindering development and growth which have become scattered under the concept of cultivating oneself. The ministry for the public must first be based on the establishment of self and then extension to the family. The outcome is that the boundary between individual and public is not clear-cut. The self is not equal in meaning to the term “individual” and the “public” is the extension of the self. These are the reasons why Chinese churches are in lack of a public theology. (See Chapter 3)

I was brought up in an evangelical background with emphasis on church growth. Church self-focus and self-expansion have been regarded as normal development. (See Chapter 2) I had the chance to learn about urban mission from Dr. Bakke which has unexpectedly changed my orientation in the church mandate for mission. It has given me a deep reflection on the relationships between “the Great Commission”, “church growth” and “urban mission” (See Chapter 4) In addition to the barrier with my theological belief and my experience, there were also barriers inside the Kei To congregation. It is not

easy to change the mission direction of the church with over 30 years' tradition common among the Chinese church. By learning the biblical theology of the city (including the congregation and myself) and through the Sunshine Service Project for the community, Kei To experienced a breakthrough and kicked off in urban mission. (See chapter 5 and chapter 6). Based on this kick off, the change in the mobilization of the congregation to be ministers in their workplace continues. The influence of Kei To is now no longer confined within the neighborhood community. It spreads throughout the whole city of Hong Kong in time of congregation scattering. (See Chapter 7)

The changes in Kei To keep me identify the challenges ahead. There are three needs in promoting Hong Kong churches' renewal for the urban mission. There are the need for a solid biblical theology for the city, the need for urban compassion and the need for networking for effective ministries. (See Chapter 8) In facing these challenges and needs, thank God for giving us the faithful partners to form the new organization "Urban Compassion" which serves as a platform for churches and Christians to exchange experience in urban mission and to make contributions both to Hong Kong and the cities in the Mainland.

Actually I am too green to face the challenges in the future which sometimes make me cannot fall into sleep. At this moment, I hear the words from the Bible:

"Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man shall attack you to harm you; for I have many people in this city.' (RSV Acts 18:9-10)