

Urban Evangelism

Ray Bakke, with Jember Tafferra, Viju Abraham,
David Ngae, and Gary Granada

Today we must confront the awesome impact of global urbanization on world evangelism. World conditions have changed dramatically. It is as though giant magnets pull continents and people together. South is meeting North. East is shifting West. Overall, we're becoming increasingly urbanized.

Our God, the Sovereign Lord of heaven and earth, is not surprised by this. The Holy Spirit is raising up a body of urban witnesses to the gospel on all six continents. The urban church of Jesus Christ has learned many new ways to tell the story of salvation and to live it out in the largest cities of the world. Yes, there is much to lament and an incredible job yet to do, but we are here to testify that there is a gospel as big as the cities.

On Lausanne-sponsored journeys over the past ten years, I have met many of God's choice servants of the gospel serving faithfully in some of the most demanding "frontlines" in world missions today. Many of you in this auditorium fit this description, but we have asked four representatives to come and briefly share what God is teaching them about proclaiming the gospel in their unique context.

First, Jember Tafferra, of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Jember, a community health worker, was married to a government official. Following an overthrow of the government, she was imprisoned for five years. Now she and other Christians are ministering to an estimated thirty thousand people even under the constant scrutiny of a hostile Marxist government. Jember, reflect over the past ten years. How did the Lord prepare you for your ministry?

Jember: I have been a Christian from childhood. While growing up, I was exposed to poverty and injustice both at home and at school. Through the years, the Lord gave me an increased sensitivity and compassion for the poor. I first worked among the poor in a large city hospital in Africa. Following that, I worked for humanitarian organizations learning more helping skills and gaining access to valuable resources. My husband was the head of a city organization. Sharing his experiences increased my understanding of social problems within a large city. All of this provided excellent training for helping the poor, but during this time my approach was "top-down" planning and organizing. Something was to happen that would change my viewpoint.

Raymond J. Bakke is Professor of Ministry at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Chicago. A Lausanne Senior Associate and an intercity pastor for many years, Dr. Bakke is a citizen of the United States.

For political reasons, I was imprisoned for five years. There I learned what it was really like to be poor. Sharing a mattress and latrine with other prisoners—that was graduate school for me! It was there I learned that effective city ministry—ministry that can change the attitudes of the poor—must begin from the *bottom* up. This ministry begins by establishing caring relationships and really listening to the poor.

Ray: Jember, the principalities and powers of evil seem to rage within some cities. Most often it is women and children who are victims of this evil. Yet, you remain courageous and hopeful. What motivates you to continue your ministry?

Jember: Three elements form the basis of my motivation. First, I have seen that the Lord loves me with unconditional love. He died for me without demanding my automatic loyalty. His is a one-way love—always downward and never dependent upon my response. He loved me first and continues to love me unconditionally. Second, Matthew 25:35–40 tells me that Jesus is with the poor and oppressed in a special way. When I serve them, I serve my Lord Jesus. And third, if Jesus is with the poor and oppressed, they are *special* people—not to be pitied or patronized, but to be loved and served with all the respect I give Jesus.

Ray: One last question. You are a gifted and educated woman with master's studies at the University of Manchester. With your international connections you have generated large sums of money for ministries in the city of Addis. Although this has blessed the ministry, you live under constant, unfriendly scrutiny—even harassment. How do you cope?

Jember: There are difficulties and constraints working in cities where there is oppression and injustice—even those in secular occupations experience difficulties. But for us, the gospel is not a private, personal matter. It must be shared and lived in reality. Therefore, my point of urban entry is holistic and development-oriented. I know God cares about every aspect of our public life together.

The poor are even more suspicious of me than the rich and powerful, for they have been victimized by all. When everyone is suspicious of us it's easy to see why some keep quiet and are reluctant to get involved in social change. Yet I see that even when the rich are suspicious and the poor are fatalistic, my Lord continues to give me a hopeful vision. He gives us victory over fear, anxiety, and self-pity. He enables us to do above all that we can imagine. He will spread his kingdom through my social-action ministry. That is his promise. That is my testimony.

Ray: Thank you, Jember. And may God go with you to multiply that faithful witness until he comes and calls for you. Let this witness from Addis remind us of those who live faithfully and serve effectively in urban environments. Our witness can—indeed must—contend with principalities and powers, for Christ is Lord of the whole city.

Viju Abraham is from Bombay—the commercial hub of India, a city of more than eleven million persons, it contains the largest slum in Asia. Viju returned to Bombay about five years ago. What did you do when you returned to Bombay? What were your plans?

Viju: My wife and I first moved to Bombay in 1971, feeling a call from God to work with university students. We didn't make much progress, so I decided to pursue

theological training. After seminary we returned in 1984 with a renewed call and a four-point agenda committed to the Lord.

My first goal was to start a church that would reach out to nonbelievers from all racial and ethnic groups. With three friends, we began what we called, the Love of Christ Fellowship.

The second goal was to develop a trans-denominational fellowship to support Christian leaders within the city. Four of us began the ministry called Bombay Urban Fellowship after one of your seminars in 1985.

My third goal was to begin a training center that would serve the needs of churches within the city, with the fourth goal to encourage those churches to minister among the poor in Bombay.

Ray: Viju, you planned and prayed. With a vision and some clear goals, you began a small support group, sharing your vision for the evangelization of Bombay. I know you could spend more than all your time pastoring your church. Why are you so concerned about other pastors and other churches? Why is Bombay Urban Fellowship so important?

Viju: We church leaders are often called to organize events like crusades or conventions. While necessary, these events would often leave us drained. Sometimes, we would even feel used by outsiders. We needed to support, encourage, and instruct one another. Four of us began with a vision that God's kingdom was larger than our individual denominations and personal ministries. We belong to each other in the kingdom of God. We meet now as church leaders from a wide spectrum of denominations—historic, evangelical, charismatic, independent, free, and catholic.

We have three primary goals: (1) fellowship in Christ, (2) the pursuit of revival in our personal lives and churches, (3) intercession for ourselves and our city.

Ray: What is unique about urban ministry training for the churches of Bombay?

Viju: Well, first the urban training in our center is done by local people who really understand our unique situation. It's not a program or curriculum package from outside Bombay. Out of the fellowship came a coalition of leaders who in 1986 decided to put a training center together. We've conducted fifteen seminars and workshops on subjects like unreached people groups, management and leadership, family life, early morning prayer, and ministry to the urban poor. All of these training packages focus on Bombay.

We learned that attendees can and will pay to support this program, even in a poor or developing country like India. Paying themselves helps them feel a sense of ownership. Our center has a twofold aim—to stimulate the churches to growth and by this to expand the mission to the city.

Ray: David Ngae comes to us from Hong Kong. He completed theological studies and combined it with a master's degree in social work, specializing in urban studies. Over the past six years, he has planted a church in a high-rise housing estate, established a government-sponsored community social program, lectured in several seminars and served in a host of other ministries besides being senior pastor of a large historic church in Swatow. David, tell us more about the partnership between the government and your new church.

David: The government of Hong Kong had a massive immigration of refugees from the Mainland. They chose to build huge highly populated housing estates. Because of my training I was given a grant to start a social service center in this place. The church started in one corner of the activities center and has grown to a core of one hundred—seventy-five of whom are indigenous to the immediate area which is a low income grass roots community. We have thirteen staff members—the government pays for ten and the church pays for two—to do the work of the center which houses the church.

Ray: Cities are filled with historic churches. Hong Kong is no exception. These churches are often like beached whales, washed in by the tide. They have huge facilities but few people, and most of them are old. In some ways, it's tempting just to ignore these churches and start new ones. One writer described the members as "God's frozen people." David, a few years ago you became senior pastor of a 120-year-old Swatow Chinese Church which had at one time dwindled to just two hundred worshippers. How has that church experienced renewal?

David: I spent the first year trying to enter into the history and memories of my church. I went back to the Swatow region of China. I read and discussed the past. My first task was to explore the roots of our people—my roots—to see how God brought the church into existence. The people learned to love me because I helped them recover their dying past. I reminded them of their once-radical commitment to serve God. My faith in their church enabled them to take my leadership seriously, even though I am young. Now the church is growing again. We're up to six or seven hundred in the services and have many revitalized ministries. Next month we're going to send our first Swatow Chinese missionary to Kenya and at the same time we're starting to plant a new church in a Hong Kong satellite city.

Ray: David, one of the themes of this Congress is "Urgency" and that reminds us of the situation in Hong Kong. The year, 1997 is coming when Hong Kong will become part of China. Since the events of Tiananmen Square in Beijing, there is rising anger, frustration, and even panic in Hong Kong. I know you could tell us many things, but please tell us what all the turmoil in China has done to the church in Hong Kong?

David: Because of 1997, a group of pastors began praying and strategizing several years ago for the renewal of the church in Hong Kong. Hong Kong is facing serious brain and capital drain. Many professional people including church leaders are leaving for North America, but since June 4 surprising things have happened. Almost spontaneously the Christians of Hong Kong have rallied on behalf of democracy on the Mainland. There have been amazing Christian demonstrations where all the churches came together to demonstrate. No one seemed to care what denomination people belonged to. We discovered in the midst of our marches and rallies that we really are Chinese. Many of us never really thought about this before. We grew up in Hong Kong with British passports, and many were educated in Canada and America. We visited the Mainland, but we were tourists. By the grace of God, the church in Hong Kong is learning to embrace being Chinese. The courageous spirits of the Beijing students awakened our moral courage. Our cities are linked together in a world of interconnected cities. We are learning to analyze our situations and take risks. In all this and in many other ways God is preparing the church of Hong Kong for 1997.

Ray: David, article 13 of the Lausanne Covenant commits us to solidarity with Chinese and all other oppressed peoples in the world on behalf of human rights. We thank you and urge everyone to pray anew for Chinese Christians everywhere in the Mainland and scattered throughout the cities of the world.

Now, we introduce Gary Granada from metro Manila, our host city. Gary is a singer-songwriter, evangelist, and community organizer. He used to organize rural areas in Marxist causes, but when he met his wife, Susan, she introduced him to Jesus and her world of ministry. Now they both minister in the slums of metro Manila, especially the garbage city called Smokey Mountain—not too far from this building.

Gary, Jesus Christ radically redirected your life. What we see on you is how the Holy Spirit has produced the fruit of a Christian social conscience. The gospel is shaping your approach to public witness on a host of social and political issues. Can you tell us more about this?

Gary: My wife and I started working with the poor outside the context of the church. We helped farmers and fishermen organize themselves and overcome structures of socio-economic oppression. We have seen incomes and employment rise substantially among rural workers. But we discovered that this increase in material well-being did not necessarily improve their Christianity. On the other hand, I have encountered many Christians who worship Jesus Christ but have nothing to do with social justice. Our work with the poor, therefore, is to witness to the power of Christ and the need to combat social oppression. If the gospel is indeed good news to the poor, then we need to understand poverty—historically, economically, culturally, and spiritually. I believe that our message becomes credible as we live close to the poor and oppressed.

Ray: Gary, you are an artist who lived in slums with the poor. You've written a song about it that won first prize in a national music competition. You're well-known for the song "Bahay" in Tagalog. Tell us about your song, then sing for us please.

Gary: When I sing before our brethren, I look very rich, and yet looking at you today I feel very poor. The Scriptures tell us that in the kingdom of God, those who gathered great material wealth often were spiritually poor. The song that I am going to sing is a simple one to show you contrasts. There are people a couple miles from here who work twelve hours a day picking up garbage for a living. Unless and until we face this dilemma, we should not be surprised if these people think our message is empty—just more trash. My song simply tells you what you already know: They are there and we are here.

One day I visited a house on the garbage dump; squeezed inside was a household of fifteen people, enduring a small makeshift, broken down shanty, while nearby a mansion was almost empty.

Imprisoned inside wooden slabs and corrugated boxes, shaded by rusting zinc sheets and worn out tires, mended together by scraps of trash and held down by stones, I could not understand why such a thing is called a house.

I decided to write a story about what my eyes saw, and even made a song that others may hear and know. I painted what I felt and put on a simple play, and asked knowledgeable people about what they can say.

A famous senator was the first person I came to see, and then an expert professor of a prominent university. And a blessed businessman and the newsmen and the pulpit man, and they all agreed that indeed it was a house.

Day and night they scrape off the mountain of trash, and eat like chickens on the floor as they squat. And force their bodies to sleep on an old torn bed. Far better is the resting place of the dead.

And if one day you'll accidentally pass by that place, and feel and hear and smell and see them face to face, I do not mean to deride, I leave it you to decide. Do you think that in the eyes of the Creator this is a house?

VIDEO PRESENTATION

God Is Building a City

Producers: Peter Blanchard, John Desjarlais

Narrator: "And he [Cain] built a city, and called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch" (Genesis 4:17, RSV).

Cities have been in existence from the time people first gathered behind walls after tending their fields. Across the world and through the years, imperial centers of commerce and culture have challenged the imagination. But as we enter the next century, something is happening to the cities for the first time.

In 1800, only 2.5 percent of the world's population lived in sizable cities. By 1900, it was only 9 percent. But by the year 2000, for the first time in history, a majority of the world's population will be living in cities. Of the world's six billion people, over three billion will live in urban centers. And 80 percent of these will live in the exploding metropolises in the developing world of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Ray Bakke: Virtually everywhere, cities are increasing in numbers. The percentages are just phenomenal. We're talking about cities like Sao Paulo, Jakarta, Bombay, Calcutta, and Mexico City, which are skyrocketing in sheer numbers.

Narrator: In 1900, there were only twenty cities in the world with a million or more people, and nearly all of the world's largest cities were in the industrialized North. But by 1985, the world had over 270 cities of a million or more. And by the year 2000, there will be over four hundred world-class cities of a million or more people. By then, nine of the world's ten largest cities will be in the developing South.

Two major factors account for the phenomenal growth of Third World cities: high birthrates and massive migrations.

Ray Bakke: The world grows at the rate of more than eight million every month. Half of the children born today will live in cities. Mexico City has a city the size of Seattle born within it every year. Cairo has a new baby born within city limits every twenty seconds. We are talking about massive numbers of new babies.

Craig Ellison: Many people are born in these cities, of course, but the migration into cities amounts to over seventy-five thousand people a day. People living in rural areas by and large are living on a subsistence-level quality of life and are barely surviving. They go to the city hoping to improve their lives.

Narrator: In the nineteenth century, industrialized cities such as London and Chicago