# Key indicators of a transformed City The Church in dialogue with its context – observations from Montréal

#### Abstract:

For the Church to be about the business of city-region transformation, the author argues it needs to know how to read a city and to know what to measure. This is not just some formula for success or the plans of a "purpose driven church." It is rooted in the life of a people who know the face of Montreal, one of Canada's most historic cities. Behind the strength of Montreal's history chiselled into the stone of century old buildings is brokenness.

In this chapter, the author will respond to the challenge issued by Larry Bourne in 2004 at the McGill Conference *Challenging Cities in Canada*<sup>1</sup>. He will examine the role of congregations – a key institutional structure of Canadian civil society in metropolitan transformation. The chapter<sup>2</sup> will begin by examining what it means to address the city. Second, the author will illustrate why a clear understanding of "a private city and a public city" is critical to understanding urban transformation. This implies looking at the contextual differences between Canadian and American cities and the unique sitting of Quebec's urban centres within the Canadian urban landscape. Third, the author will explore what metropolitan transformation looks like in Canada from the Montréal ecclesial experience. The chapter will conclude with some practical considerations for congregations.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> L.S. Bourne, Beyond the new deal for cities: confronting the challenges of uneven urban growth. Research Bulletin #21. Toronto: Centre des etudes urbaines et communautaires, University of Toronto. 2004.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> This paper is from the text "City Air Makes You Free: Transforming the city through a fresh, biblical hermeneutic." Portions of this chapter first appeared as "Canadian Urban Ministry: Proposals for New Initiatives." Discipling Our Nation: Equipping The Canadian Nation for Its Mission. Ed. Muray Moerman. (Delta: Church Leadership Library: 2005), p. 77-95. It subsequently was re-published by World Pulse of LCWE in September 2006.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Sam Bass Warner, The Private City. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968) and John Mercer, The Canadian City in Continental Context, in Canadian Cities in Transition edited by Trudi Bunting and Pierre Fortin. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1991) 45-68.

<sup>4</sup> Mercer, 61.

It always struck me funny that classical philosophers and theologians begin their writings with a prologue, which in Greek is called a *prolegomenon*. *Pro* expresses what comes first and *legein* means to say. Therefore, a prolegomenon is a formal, critical introduction to a lengthy text. Why one needs to say something before one says it was a question I asked as an undergraduate student. I have later come to understand the usefulness of such an approach! This first section of this chapter begins with such a prolegomenon to set the stage for addressing the city. The second section will examine how we think about cities like Montréal. This will allow us to consider, in the third section, issues of transformation of a city-region and the place of the Church in such an enterprise. We will conclude with some practical considerations of what this means as this Church pursues God's global urban mission.

#### Addressing the city

For a number of years, I have been inviting students, audiences, and readers to join me on the 19-kilometre trip that I make every day from my home in the inner suburbs of Montréal to my office in the downtown core. It provides a *prolegomenon* to the themes that inform this chapter. The themes include the social context in which we live our daily lives and our common ecclesial traditions rooted in the Holy Scriptures, Christian history and theology. But this chapter is also about reflecting on city-region transformation in Canadian cities. Urban growth, urbanization, and urbanism are recurring themes for congregations in the era of globalisation. Theologians and philosophers warn us that too much emphasis on social context threatens to reduce the truth to simple social commentary. On the other hand, ecclesial practitioners warn us that "too much" cerebral endeavour often seeks to disguise itself as ivory tower nonsense and takes us away from "the real work of the ground." For Christians in the city, God is Alpha and Omega; but Jesus became a first-century Jew and lived and laboured primarily in cities of Palestine in the era of second temple Judaism<sup>5</sup> (Sjoberg, 1960).

In many ways, my journey resembles the trip you, the reader, would make through your city. I walk out the door of my home into an amazingly cosmopolitan neighbourhood, called Chomedey. In the homes on my street I can hear several different languages being spoken, symbolizing a diverse array of cultures. What was once a former European immigration has now shifted to a truly global movement. When I first began thinking about my neighbourhood I was struck by the linguistic plurality. Today, the "Islamisation" of Chomedey is very real. As I stride toward the bus stop, I pass the only Protestant church and then I cut through the parking lot of the Roman Catholic parish. Forty years ago, both churches were full for weekend services. The United Church had a Sunday school that taught over 200 children. The exodus of Anglophones from Montréal has decimated the congregation. Today, 40 gather on Sunday at 11 a.m. for worship. The

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Richard Bauckham *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World.* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) reminds us that the issue of universality and particularity is essential to mission and to how we read the Bible.

Roman Catholic parish once celebrated 45 masses each week. Late last year, they sold the parish to an immigrant Armenian congregation.

These remarkable religious changes remind me that my neighbours are much more concerned with their own pursuits and the development of a personal value system rather than that offered by ecclesiastical structures. All things religious have been marginalized in Montréal.<sup>6</sup>

A 12-minute bus ride takes me to the Metro (the subway) where I now enter another world, the metropolis of Montréal. It is one of the largest French-speaking cities<sup>7</sup> in the world and the hub of a social transformation, better known as the Quiet Revolution that has altered the very face of Quebec.

The subway takes me into the heart of the city, but through several different "Montréals." I pass under *student Montréal*, which includes four major universities and 30 community colleges, including 15 CÉGEPS and 40 professional and technical establishments. Montréal has the most students per capita of any city in North America. <sup>8</sup> The population of student Montréal, isolated by itself, would make it the 13<sup>th</sup> largest city in Canada.

Montréal is also a *hurting city*, with hundreds of AIDS victims, a reported 238,000 people on the welfare rolls and some 9,000 adolescent prostitutes. Harvest Montréal, the organization that orchestrates food distribution among the poor, gives out 35 tons of food a day to 150,000 people a week. If you look at the issue chronologically one sees that the Montréal gap with Toronto has been closing since 1960 yet in 1995, this CMA had the highest rate of poverty in Canada at 27.3% and still a full 9% higher than in the rest of Québec by 2000. With the new Market Basket Measure, Montréal was showing an economic improvement for the poor. My Metro companions seem oblivious to this reality: workers with a secondary school leaving certificate have an average income of \$23,562 while a university grad earns a double amount, \$41,277. In a city where better than 50% of kids drop out of high school, the future does not look bright!<sup>9</sup>

As we swing through parts of *ethnic Montreal*, I am reminded that the 200,000 elementary and secondary students in the five school boards of Montréal represent 168 countries.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that in 1979, Le CRÉPUQ (Conseil des recteurs et principales des universités du Québec) requested a report on "knowledge in the most highly developed societies." Montréal was the context from which Jean-François Lyotard wrote the book, *La condition post-moderne*, Collection «Critique », Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> In the CMA of Montréal, 68% of the population speak French, 12.5% speak English and 19.5% are identified as allophones.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> See OECD territorial review of Montréal (2004) for an excellent insight into this aspect of the Census Metropolitan Area, page 49.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> For a more detailed analysis of these issues see Glenn Smith, Etude #4, Comprendre la pauvreté au Québec et développer des ministères à caractère social. Direction Chrétienne, décembre 2005.

At the McGill Metro stop, I am literally pushed out of the Metro car. Some 750,000 people call this "home" throughout the working week. This is *business Montréal*. The Census Metropolitan Area generates 76% of the entire Québec economy. Several years ago, I began to do an interesting exercise with my students in a course I teach on urban ministry. The class begins by visiting a rather large ethnic grocery store, Inter-Marché that is about a kilometre from the faculty building. The store has a huge inventory of foods from several different countries, arranged in aisles that represent the continents. Haitian food covers a third of the Caribbean aisle. Forty-five different flags used to hang from the ceiling, all contributed by the customers of the store. Inter-Marché is a success because the owner realized Montréal is changing and his store better adapt to new realities. He does a booming business.

However, in the same neighbourhood we also visit a church building with its English-only sign: "We worship God every Sunday at 11 am." It does not take great teaching skill to lead the discussion that evening on the nature of pastoral leadership in a changing situation. They suddenly want to know how to "exegete the neighbourhood," much like they have learned to study a biblical text.

When we walk through our city-regions and reflect on transformation, immediately we are struck by the necessity to address both macro and micro issues. In choosing to "address" the city, we need to remember some preliminary, foundational issues that are often overlooked by people living in metropolitan areas, especially the Church.

First, it is obvious that we need to place each individual city in its own context yet understand its place in the larger urban system. Because of globalisation, no one metropolitan area exists in isolation from others. When you ask me where I live, the answer not only depends on where I live but to whom I am speaking. I can tell someone from Chomedey that I live on 5<sup>th</sup> Street, a Québécois that I live in Chomedey, but to someone outside of Québec, I am from Montréal. Each "address" tells something about me: my living environment, the languages I use on a day-to-day basis, my lifestyle, and perhaps my social status.

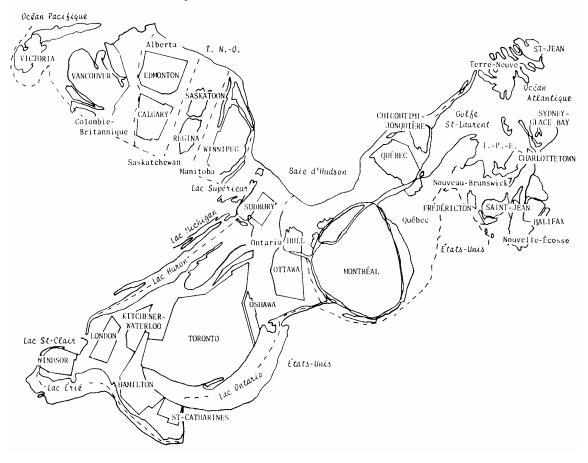
To approach this subject from a perspective of what is happening to cities across Canada and the world, and then within one's own municipality, or to work in the reverse order is not all that important. What is important is to see the inter-relationships between the local, the national, and the global systems. It is also important to adjust these "addresses" for the audience in question.

Second, when the Church addresses the city, we must direct our attention to urban realities. And we need to understand our own assumptions and framework. The Church however, will always want to keep a focus on a biblical perspective on cities.

In this discussion of cities and specifically in the era of municipal fusions in Canada, there are three issues that must be considered. First, one needs to consider the principal dimensions of change that have affected this country over the decades. This

includes the vast increase in the size of urban areas, including four major components: population, employment, capital investment, and infrastructure. Second, we need to understand the emerging polarized social landscape that is touching every area of urban life. Finally, we must take note of the increasing poverty in our CMAs.

It is remarkable how the urban landscape has evolved throughout the history of the country. At Canadian Confederation in 1867, fewer than one in five citizens lived in towns and cities of 1,000 or more population. By 1924, Canada was considered an urban nation by Statistics Canada, as better than 50% of the population lived in an area of 1,000 people or more. In 1965, the country was truly metropolitan as 50% of the population lived in cities of 10,000 people or more. Now, there are 140 urban centres, occupying less than 3% of the land. In the three largest urban centres—Vancouver, Toronto, and Montréal—we find 35% of the population occupying 0.8% of the land. It is for this reason that I say, "The urban system of Canada is Canada." This isodemographic map of Canada illustrates this reality.



Three processes are at work. First, urbanization happens because of the natural growth as the number of births exceeds the number of deaths. Second, the migration of large numbers of people from rural areas to the city increases the population. It is estimated that better than 40% of urban growth is from this process alone. Finally, in the larger cities of the "developed world," mergers, or the incorporation of peripheral areas into one

city metropolis, are causing cities to grow. This is certainly true of the Canadian urban landscape. <sup>10</sup>

These realities force the Church to take metropolitan areas much more seriously. More theological emphasis on the city as a specific geographical place needs to be emphasized in our preaching and teaching. Bible studies on the mission of God in the city are needed if the Church is to equip the whole people of God to love the places in which we live. Church renewal initiatives need to be more intentional in populations in our cities where the Good News has been marginalized.

Many pastoral leaders do cultural studies and wrestle with (the sociology of) place. On a different track, other practitioners try to get their heads around the worldviews that make up the personality of our cities (sometimes referred to as a *horizon or space*). We need to help urban ministry practitioners put these two approaches together so that in examining the city as a place, we are also learning to look very closely at the worldviews that are reflected in the urban context. Place is space with historical meanings, different identities, varied societal preoccupations.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> One needs to ask the question, "Why Do Provincial Governments Pursue Municipal Mergers?" Throughout the past ten years, the Canadian urban context changed radically. New mega cities were created in Halifax, Toronto, Ottawa, Kingston, Montreal, Longueuil, Québec, Lévis, and Gatineau. Three obvious justifications are often given...I add a fourth. First, economies of scale: To save money, they expect major reduction in cost with no change in services. Second, globalization: We can't compete on the international scene. One huge agglomeration can compete. Montréal and Toronto lead the way in this argument. Third, better management of services: The government proposes that police, fire, and housing services will be better coordinated in large agglomerations. It is claimed that this management of services will directly benefit the poor. The wealthier borough of Pointe-Claire will help struggling Point St-Charles. However, in Québec, where language plays a role in every issue, some say it will cause the disappearance of Anglophone communities and create uni-lingual communities. Finally, pure bureaucratic convenience: As Jane Jacobs, the late well-known urbanologist, reminded me in an interview, "It is much easier for provincial government to deal with five mayors than some 100." But she added, "Nobody has ever proven that bigger is more economical."

<sup>11</sup> One of the most recent texts on urban geography that takes these two distinct categories seriously is by A. M. Orum and X. Chen, *The World of Cities: Places in Comparative and Historical Perspective.* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003). For these authors *place* is the specific locations in space that provide an anchor and meaning to who we are. (See pages 1, 15, 140 and 168) Our sense of place is rooted in individual identity, community, history and a sense of comfort (11-19). *Space*, on the other hand, is a medium independent of our existence in which objects, ideas and other human persons exist behaving according to the basic laws of nature and thought (see pages 15, 140 and 160-170).

### Penser la ville<sup>12</sup>

In spite of the vast and excellent literature on Canadian urban issues that exists today (Ley, 1996; Bunting and Filion, 2000, 2006; Lorinc, 2005), unfortunately very little has been written to document the experience of Christian ecclesial reflection and practice in our census metropolitan areas. Over the past decade very few significant articles have appeared. 13 David Ley, professor of urban geography at the University of British Columbia has written three fine, accessible pieces about faith in the Canadian city (Ley, 1992, 1993, 2000). There are three reasons to explain this. First and foremost, people doing urban ministry in Canada (and across the globe, for that matter) rarely take time to reflect in writing on their actions and learnings. We all are impoverished because of this. Second, American perspectives influence far too many notions about urban mission and ministry in Canada. Christians continue to identify urban ministry (solely) with inner city poverty issues, neglecting the broader issues of Canadian urbanization and urbanism. For that reason alone, one must insist on describing metropolitan orientations by using Canadian data. Finally, far too many practitioners, especially church planters, are using American paradigms. The unending debates about the usefulness of "seeker-sensitive" models, "purpose-driven initiatives," and "Christ and our culture forums" are examples of this. We are not taking the time to think biblically so as to act contextually.

Richard Sennett defines a city as "a human settlement in which strangers are likely to meet" (Sennett, 1974, 39). The United Nations Population Fund documents the diversity of definitions for an urban category in its 1996 State of the World Population report. A British urbanologist, David Clark has clarified many of these issues in his most recent book (Clark, 1996). The OECD prefers to speak of a functional metropolitan area, reflecting organisation of social and economic relations. 15

But beyond definitions and the demographic function of cities known as "urban growth," one may ask, "What is happening to Canadian urban society?" What were the conditions, inherited from the past, which have been transformed in these last forty years that help us understand its present state? This is a fundamental question we need to

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> This title is inspired by the fine piece edited by Pierre Ansay et René Schoonbrodt, Penser la ville. (Bruxelles: AAM éditions, 1989.) Thinking about the city is a natural next step (for congregations) after appropriating place and space.

Refer as well to the short bibliography for other works on the subject. For a more detailed analysis on method in pursuing urban ministry reflection, read Glenn Smith, "Doing Theology in the Canadian Urban Context: Some Preliminary Reflections", in Studies in Canadian Evangelical Renewal - Essays in Honour of Ian S. Rennie (Toronto: FT Publications, 1996), p.81-103. Also see note 24 on p.225 of Espoir pour la ville: Dieu dans la cité. (QC: Éditions de la Clairière, 1994)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> He names a population of 50,000 people or less a *town* or a *village*. On the other hand, *cities* are human agglomerations that have up to 200,000 residents. A *metropolitan area* has more than two million people, but a *megalopolis* is an urban region over five million. These distinctions are helpful because a country like Norway considers any human settlement of 200 people as urban, while Bénin, for example, only uses "urban" for places of 10,000 or more people. Statistics Canada defines a census metropolitan area as a human settlement of 125,000 or more people. In 2001, Abbotsford, BC (population 147,370), Kingston, Ontario (144,838), and Thunder Bay, Ontario (125,986) were added to the list since the last complete census in 1991.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Redefining Territories: The Functional Region. (Paris: OECD, 2002)

explore, if we are to understand the cultural context in which the Church finds herself. But our concern points in a further direction with a second question, "How will the church reflect and pursue relevant biblical urban mission in the years ahead?"

To answer these two questions, an attentive practitioner can use an ethnographic analysis of the culture so as to understand how social structures and human behaviour interact and influence a city. An ethnographic method is an excellent tool for the Christian practitioner who desires to study the following: the knowledge and practices of people; the manner they use their freedom to dominate, to transform, to organize, to arrange, and to master space for their personals pursuit so as to live, to protect themselves, to survive, to produce, and to reproduce. To do this one must master dominant tendencies so as to grasp where we have come from and where we are going as a society and what the mission of God in this culture will look like.

It is also obvious that urban practitioners need to be able to identify local worldviews in order to understand the spirituality in their particular context. A worldview is primarily a lens through which we understand life. Generally speaking, it includes a series of presuppositions that a group of people holds, consciously and unconsciously, about the basic make-up of the community, relationship, practices and objects of daily life, whether they are of great signification or of little importance. They are like the foundations of a house - vital but invisible. The make-up of a worldview is based on the interaction of one's ultimate beliefs and the global environment within which one lives. They deal with the perennial issues of life like religion and spirituality; yet contain answers to even simple questions such as whether we eat from individual plates or from a common bowl.

Worldviews are communicated through the channel of culture. We should be careful to not confuse culture and worldview, although they are in constant relationship with one another. Culture is foremost a network of meanings by which a particular social group is able to recognize itself through a common history and a way of life. This network of meanings is rooted in ideas (including beliefs, values, attitudes, rules of behaviour), rituals and material objects including symbols that become a source for identity such as the language we speak, the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the way we organize space. This network is not a formal and hierarchical structure. It is defined in modern society by constant change, mobility, reflection and ongoing experiences. This is in contrast to traditional societies where culture was transmitted directly from one generation to the next within the community structures. Modernity still transmits some aspects of culture like language and basic knowledge directly through the bias of the school system, but once this is done, the transmission of culture through friendship, peers and socio-professional status becomes more important.

The description for cultural analysis that I use allows a practitioner to take seriously the fact that social activity is culturally and historically specific. Urban hermeneutics allows us to understand or decode the polarity between social structure and human agency, which is constantly at work in a metropolitan area. Social institutions—the basic building blocks of a city because of their far-reaching spatial and temporal existence—are used by human agents to create urban systems and metropolitan

structures. Human actions are constrained by these structures but are also enabled by them. In attempting to understand a city, neither the subject (the human agent) nor the object (society and social institutions) has primacy.

By grasping this geography of urban functions, we are looking at issues (the social dynamics, problems, needs, aspirations, and world views) that are culturally and historically specific. Like the city itself, these issues reflect the prevailing values, ideology, and structure of the prevailing social formation. A useful analytical, social, and theological purpose is served by the empirical recognition that urban issues are manifest in geographical space. This implies that the resulting description will detail issues "in" the city as well as issues "of" the city. (For example, an issue in urban space would include the consequences of population density in a census district in Ville St-Laurent that has 11.536 people per square kilometre versus the Census Metropolitan Area of Montréal norm of 847. An issue of urban space includes attention to the socio-economic factors that go hand-in-hand with such population concentration.)

To pursue this ethnographic analysis, the urban ministry practitioner will need to bring:

- a high sensitivity to the local specifics and to micro details in the context.
- a concern for the larger worldview influences (understood as the macro issues).
- a synthesis beyond a simple homogenisation of the data.
- a true appreciation of the differences between cities, regions, and even neighbourhoods so that one can appreciate the specifics of the area in the light of mission of the Church in the situation.

At first glance the analysis is striking. For years urbanologists spoke about the North American city, combining Canadian and American cities in their analysis. Although most Protestant denominations in Canada have separate administrative structures, the missional approach is still amazingly "(North) American." However, if one applies the urban method we propose, it becomes obvious that Canadian cities are distinct. In our URBAN FORM, Canadian cities are more compact in size and therefore considerably denser in population. 16 In TRANSPORTATION and TRAVEL, Canadian cities have four times fewer freeways, relying 2-1/2 times more per capita on public transportation. (Interestingly, Americans own and operate 50% more motor vehicles than Canadians.)<sup>17</sup> URBAN POPULATIONS represent more ethnic diversity, higher incomes, and more "traditional family" units. Canadian middle-income families show more propensity to stay in the central city. In monetary terms of URBAN GROWTH and DECLINE, Canadian cities are more stable, perhaps because URBAN SAFETY is much more in evidence. 18 Finally, URBAN GOVERNMENT is radically different between the two countries. However, in URBAN FISCAL POLICY, American cities depend on property

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Montréal is the third most densely populated city in North American, slightly behind New York and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Montréal has the highest number of commuters and people walking or biking to work per capita in North

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Montréal's homicide rate is 2 per 100,000 people compared to an average of 20 in major US cities.

taxes for only 27% of their total revenue in contrast to 52% for Canadian cities. <sup>19</sup> U.S. cities have more access to local sales taxes and income taxes and receive greater state and federal transfers than Canadian cities.

#### *Transforming the City*

The central tenet of my argument therefore leads us to affirm that cities evolve within the worldview of the societies within which they are located. In spatial and architectural forms they are manifestations of deeply rooted cultural processes that encompass economic and religious elements as well.

As we have already seen, there has been a massive worldview shift in cities like Montréal. The roots of modernity and post-modernity with the ensuing marginalization of the social significance of religion are found in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when European philosophy placed its confidence in the power of reason to provide a foundation for knowledge. This confidence is often referred to as "Rationalism". The idea that divine revelation is essential was gradually discarded. For over two centuries the debate has raged about how to rationally find "true-truth" and morality based on reason alone. This move created an implicit trust in science as the answer to all humanity's problems.

There are four essential features of this culture of rationalism and the challenges that ensue in a mission with the city. First, rationalism interprets all reality scientifically. This brings the double consequence of the separation of work from the home and the ensuing growth of cities as a result of the mechanization of this work. Individualism saw its birth at this juncture. Purpose was abandoned; all processes were measured in terms of cause and effect.

Second, a sharp distinction is made between personal values and objective knowledge. A dichotomy between the private and the public worlds becomes fundamental to modern Western culture.

Third, in medieval Europe, a stable social order was based on revelation. But with the Enlightenment era came a rational, scientific and never-ending bureaucratic approach to reality. The consequences of modernity included unprecedented economic activities, the exponential growth of technical skill and knowledge, education, exploding urbanization, rootlessness, communication and information technologies (CITs) and the separation of work from home, including the mechanization of work. Tradition began to be viewed with suspicion.

Fourth, all (scientific) knowledge was therefore viewed as a-cultural and a-historical. It provides answers for everybody, everywhere.

The cultural consequences of such an approach to reality in the urban milieu is most dramatically seen in the recent decline in the presence, influence, and power of the

<sup>19</sup> In Québec municipalities, 76% of total revenue is from property taxes, severely limiting (for example) Montréal's ability to manoeuvre

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Roman Catholic Church in the city. For example in Québec, the number of priests rose from four thousand in 1930 to five thousand in 1945 to 8,400 in 1960. Today, there are less than three thousand and the average age is 63 years of age. Although Québecois still maintain the highest level of commitment to religious affiliation in North America (79% still consider themselves Christian and 50% identify themselves as profoundly committed to their faith), religious practice is the lowest on the continent. Only 15% go to a religious service once a week and 5% in the urban centres. Spirituality has been completely privatised in Quebec society, and institutionalised religion is scorned. Montreal is filled with empty cathedrals.

The consequences also affect the very nature of Canadian and Québec urban understanding. John Mercer has illustrated at length the fundamental differences in American and Canadian cities on a private – public (city) continuum. Whereas public cities prioritise the collectivity, the common good, belief and trust in government and active urban planning, private cities look to autonomy in municipal affairs, special purpose districts, individual rights and extensive use of user fees. It is not merely a question of government intervention, regardless of the level of intervention. The continuum reflects the result of the nature of the intervention. Sam Bas Warner has done the classical study on the issues in his historical study of Philadelphia. However, over the course of the past 20 years, Montréal is increasingly becoming a "private city" as evidenced by the significant percentage of people who live alone – now close to 40% of the population on the island of Montréal. This movement to a private city will only be accentuated in the days ahead. With the monumental infrastructure challenges that cities like Montréal face, the polarized social landscape rooted in educational and economical polarities and the margianlization of institutional life this movement will only get larger.

Some people look at this spiritual and social plight of the city and ask, "Where is the Church?" and then rush to critique her lack of significant involvement in the complexities of the city. I would rather ask the question, "What will the Church look like?" in the midst of the emerging private city and this all-encompassing plurality, polarization and the competing worldviews. There are two principal sources of information that inform contextual urban ministry and help us to understand what the Church will look like. In this framework we look towards the transformation of cities by God's Spirit by listening to the Text and paying close attention to our contexts. (Smith: 1996. 2005)

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> See the research article, « Pourquoi la spiritualité est-elle si populaire aujourd'hui au Québec ? Une analyse des données du sondage IPSO-REID du mois d'octobre 2003. » Direction chrétienne, décembre, 2003.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Goldberg Mercer initially articulated this thesis in The Myth of the North American City (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1986). Mercer pursued it further in The Canadian City in Continental Context, in Canadian Cities in Transition edited by Trudi Bunting and Pierre Fortin. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1991) 45-68.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Sam Bass Warner, The Private City. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968) Eric Jacobsen uses similar nomenclature in his interesting text, Sidewalks in the Kingdom (Grand Rapids: Bravos Press, 2003.) 49-56 and 157-159. However, it applies the idea primarily to the Church.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Annick Germain and Damaris Rose, Montréal: The Quest for a Metropolis. (West Sussex: John Wiley and Sons, 2000) 193-197.

Studying the Text and the context in this fashion represents a holistic enterprise in which the Holy Spirit guides the interpreters to a more complete reading and understanding of Scripture and a more complete understanding of the culture. There is an ongoing, mutual engagement of the essential components of the process. As they interact, they are mutually adjusted. In this way, we come to Scripture with relevant questions and perspectives. This results in a more attentive ear to the implications of the exegetical process and an ensuing theology that is more biblical and pertinent to the culture. As we move from the cultural context through our own evolving worldview to the Bible and back to the context, we adopt an increasingly relevant local reflection and more appropriate initiatives.

The process of interpreting the Text and the context (referred to as hermeneutics) becomes a true exchange between gospel and context. We come to the infallible message with an exegetical method to understand a biblical theology of place. We ask, "What does God say through Scripture regarding this particular context?" This includes place, problems, values, and worldviews. This initial dialogue sets us out on a long process where the more we understand the context; the more fresh readings of the Bible will arise. Scripture illuminates life. But life also illuminates Scripture! This dialogue must also include the practitioners' worldview and that of the community in which they base their initiatives.

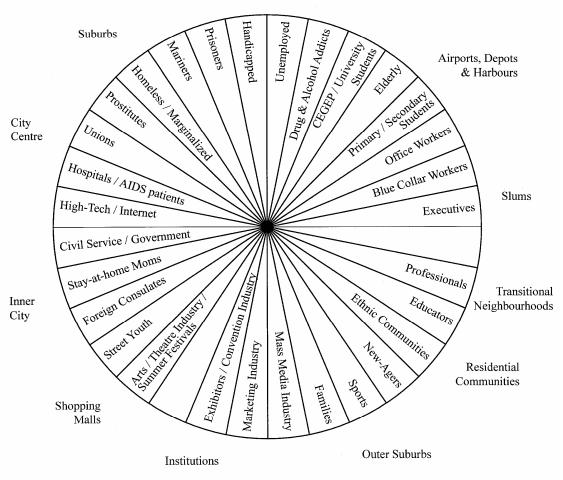
As we listen to Scripture and walk through our various situations in life, we are faced with a question. How can we hear and apply God's word in our cities and neighbourhoods?

But our understanding of social context raises several foundational questions. "How do we know a context when we see one?" "How big is a context?" "How long does it last?" "Who is in it and is out of it, and how do we know?" In reality, the complexity of the city means we constantly ask these questions. The following representation inspired by the work of urban ministry practitioners in Montreal seeks to take into account most of the factors that determine context.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> I am grateful to my dear friend, doctoral advisor, mentor, and colleague, Ray Bakke for the idea on this

representation. He first presented it to me when I was completing my D. Min studies in 1990. We have played with it ever since in urban courses and consultations around the globe. It helps the urban practitioner to understand that a city is about functions and roles, not just geography. The present diagram represents Montréal as my colleagues at Christian Direction understand our CMA.

# Organizational and Population Segments of an Urban World - Montréal



09/2001

This forces us to ask questions about contextualisation. It is a critical issue for the Church in a city to face in light of questions raised at the local, national or global level. The word is relatively new in theological circles. (Conn, 1984; Bakke, Pownall, Smith: 1995) It implies the interweaving of the Scriptural teaching about the city and the Church with a particular, present-day context. The very word focuses the attention on the role of the context in the theological enterprise. In a very real sense, then, all doctrinal reflection from the Scriptures is related in one way or another to the situation from which it is born, addressing the aspirations, the concerns, the priorities and the needs of the local group of Christians who are doing the reflection.

Contextualization begins with an attempt to discern where God by his Spirit is at work in the context. It continues with a desire to demonstrate the gospel in word and deed and to establish groups of people who desire to follow Jesus in ways that make sense to people within their (cultural) context, presenting Christianity in such a way that

it meets people's deepest needs and penetrates their worldview, thus allowing them to follow Christ and remain within their culture.

The task of contextualisation is the essence of urban reflection and action. The challenge is to remain faithful to the historic text of Scriptures while being mindful of today's realities. An interpretative bridge is built between the Bible and the situation from which the biblical narrative sprang, to the concerns and the circumstances of the local group of Christians who are doing the reflection. The first step of the hermeneutic involves establishing what the Text meant at the time it was written: what it meant "then". The second step involves creating the bridge to explore how the text is understood in meaningful terms for the interpreters today: what it could mean "now". The final step is to determine the meaning and application for those who will receive the message in their particular circumstances, as present day interpreters become ambassadors of the Good News. (Hiebert: 1987)

But for what purpose does the urban ministry practitioner pursue contextualization? Why listen to both the present context and Christian tradition, including our study of the Scriptures, Church history and theology? Increasingly we hear the use of the word *transformation* as a term that encompasses all that the Church does as followers of Jesus in God's mission in the city. But what does this mean? What does it entail?

The 1990 Population Fund Report on cities laid out interesting strategies for more livable urban areas. The Population Crisis Committee carried out the most complete study ever done. Data was gathered from the world's largest 100 metropolitan areas. Based on a 13-page questionnaire, the researchers wanted to determine the quality of life in these places. Ten parameters were chosen to determine the *livability* of these cities. Based on these criteria an urban living standard score was calculated. The parameters provide a glimpse of what *transformation* might include.<sup>25</sup>

Beatley and Manning offer this picture, "To foster a sense of place, communities must nurture built environment and settlement patterns that are uplifting, inspirational and memorable, and that engender a special feeling and attachment...a sustainable community where every effort is made to create and preserve places, rituals and events that foster greater attachment to the social fabric of the community." (1997:32)<sup>26</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> (1.) Public safety based on local police estimates of homicides per 100,000 people; (2.) Food costs representing the percentage of household income spent on food. (3.) Living space being the number of housing units and the average persons per room. (4.) Housing standards being the percentage of homes with access to water and electricity. (5.) Communication is the number of reliable sources of telecommunications per 100 people. (6.) Education is based on the percentage of children, aged 14-17 in secondary schools. (7.) Public health criteria are based on infant deaths per 1,000 live births. (8.) Peace and quiet based on a subjective scale for ambient noise. (9.) Traffic flow being the average miles per hour during rush hour. (10.) Clean air based on a one-hour concentration in ozone levels.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> The United Nations Millennium Development Goals provide a marvelous starting point for a reflection on transformation as well for a local congregation. The reader is invited to consult the web page <a href="http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/index.shtml">http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/index.shtml</a> that describes the goals. A valuable exercise would be for the church to contextualise these eight goals in their city-region in collaboration with other churches. A

Inspired by John de Gruchy reflections<sup>27</sup>, I would suggest that a transformed place is that kind of city that pursues fundamental changes, a stable future and the sustaining and enhancing of all of life rooted in a vision bigger than mere urban politics.

If we accept that the Scriptures calls the people of God to take all dimensions of life seriously, then we can take the necessary steps to a more holistic notion of transformation. A framework that points to the best of a human future for our cityregions can then be rooted in the reign of God.

In Jewish writings and tradition is the principle of *shalom*. It represents harmony, complementarity, and establishment of relationships at the interpersonal, ethnic, and even global levels. Psalm 85:11 announce a surprising event: "Justice and peace will embrace." However, a good number of our contemporaries see no problem with peace without justice. People looking for this type of peace muzzle the victims of injustice because they trouble the social order of the city. But the Bible shows that there cannot be peace without justice. We also have a tendency to describe peace as the absence of conflict. But *shalom* is so much more. In its fullness it evokes harmony, prosperity, and welfare. Today, we pray for our cities, that God would use His people to extend this *shalom* throughout the new emerging Canadian urban system.

In the New Testament, this reign of God is the royal redemptive plan of the Creator, initially given as a task marked out for Israel, then re-inaugurated in the life and mission of Jesus. This reign is to destroy his enemies, to liberate humanity from the sin of Adam and ultimately establish his authority in all spheres of the cosmos: our individual lives, the Church, society, the spirit world and ecological order. Yet, we live in the presence of the future. The Church is "between the times," as it were: between the inauguration and the consummation of the Kingdom. It is the only message worth taking to the whole city!

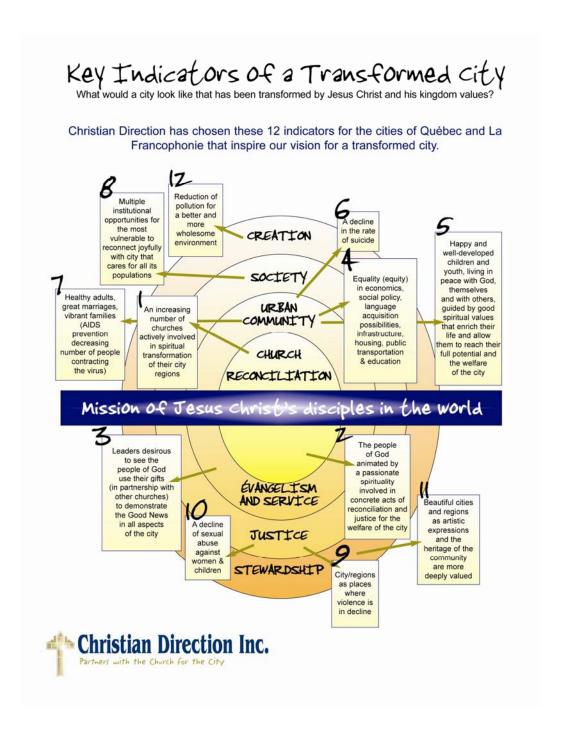
In light of all these realities an increasing number of congregations in the Montréal CMA have adopted the following schema and the 12 indicators as a vision of what our transformed city would look like. Rooted in four concentric circles that represent God's concern for all of life beginning with the congregation that embodies shalom and reconciliation and subsequently demonstrates the Good News in their community, society and in all of the created order. But so as to measure realistically the vision, we have articulated 12 indicators of the type of transformation we are pursuing. These address contextual concerns in our city. Accompanying these indicators are baselines based on research on the state of life in the city. Congregations work together to pursue the welfare of the city.

<sup>27</sup> John W. de Gruchy, Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the struggle for Social Justice. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

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congregation could use the framework of a city proposed on page 12 and develop strategies based on the concept of the rule of God and the millennium goals to pursue the social and spiritual transformation of the whole city.

This vision seeks to help the Church participate in the transformation of the city, particularly in an era of human brokenness.



Yet how do the people of God pursue such a vision?

## Understanding mission as missio Dei<sup>28</sup>

Since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Church is pursuing missiology<sup>29</sup> through the lens of the *mission of God*. The concept of the *missio Dei* finds its roots in the writings of Karl Barth who saw it necessary to emphasize the *action of God* in contrast to the human-centred focus of the liberal theology of his day.

Missio Dei establishes the priority of God's activity in terms of mission and characterizes God as himself being a missionary God. In this case mission cannot be conceived of primarily or even essentially as an activity or program of the Church but must be rooted in God. The Church exists because of mission, mission (with all its activities and committees and organisations) does not exist because of the Church.

In his tremendous love for the created order, God engages in the mission of salvation and redemption for the whole order through the Father's sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Through this missionary activity of the triune God, the Church is formed, a community of those who in turn are called to participate in the mission of God, to reach out with the salvation and redemption God has initiated and is pursuing in the world.

This hermeneutical approach to the *missio Dei* or *mission of God* in city/regions reaffirms "the scandal of particularity." Urban missiology is rooted in the very particular stories of cities in the Bible and especially of the Good News of Jesus' incarnation and the cosmic goal God has undertaken to re-inaugurate his reign through his death on the cross. There has been a tendency to question the uniqueness of God's participation with creation through the history of Israel and in the person of Jesus Christ. Instead the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> I am grateful to John Vissers and Roland De Vries for helping me in the formulation of the following section. See their unpublished paper, "Evangelizing the Church: Towards A Reformed Theology of Mission for Canadian Presbyterians."

Missiology is the exegetical, theological and cultural study about the mission of God in the world and the ensuing mission of the church. For that reason it is often defined as an inter-disciplinary field of reflection and action. When we shape this discussion contextually and pursue this reflection for a city/region, we are seeking to relate both urban geography and mission. The former analyses the reasons for the spatial differences of human activity in urban areas. Missiology seeks a more adequate understanding of the apostolic mission of the Church while remaining faithful to the exegetical task of understanding the mind of the Biblical writer. But this "fusion of horizons" is fraught with danger. As Minear reminds us, "When, therefore, the exegete deals with the apostle Paul, and when missiology accepts Paul's apostolic work as normative for the continuing mission of the Church, then these two aims coalesce." In reality, as we study and listen to Scripture and walk through the various contexts of metropolitan life, we are faced with the basic question: "How will the Church reflect biblically about the city and pursue relevant mission in her context in the years ahead?"

concept of *mission* was broadened almost to the point that the Church was stripped of any responsibility for proclamation and service - the Church was excluded from mission. This exclusion of the Church resulted in an argument that God was "working out His purposes in the midst of the world and its historical processes." It was simply the Church's responsibility to serve *missio Dei* by pointing to God "at work in world history and name Him there."

This focus on God's action in the world and its historical processes, to the exclusion of the Church's mission of witness and service, was closely tied to what could be described as an exaggerated eschatology in which the fullness of God's kingdom was expected to be accomplished through the social and political motions of history. In order to avoid the severing of the *missio Dei* concept from the teachings of classical Christianity, and in an attempt to hold together the whole mission of God for the whole city, it will be important to hold the universal concept of the *missio Dei* together with the particular history of God's plenary revelation in the person and work of Jesus Christ and read the story in our own unique contexts.

The tension between the *global dimensions* of God's mission (for the whole cosmos) and the *particularity of the means* is foundational to biblical theology. The tension draws some to a kind of universalism that loses touch with God's specific redemptive purposes, especially in Jesus Christ or to a particularity that sees God having two projects – one for Israel and another for Gentiles.

It is obvious to us that the call for human unity - our common humanity as it is often referred to – must be reconciled with the Christian claim to the uniqueness of Jesus – the scandal of particularity. No one in his or her right mind denies the need for human unity! It offers the promise of peace. The problem of relating God's universality to his particular deeds and words is daunting however. God is over all and in all. The Bible talks of God acting and God speaking in particular times and places. Every worldview that makes human unity implicit has organizing principles that make that unity possible. But as Lesslie Newbigin reminds us, "if there is no explicit statement of the centre of unity, then the assumptions and interests of the proposer become the effective centre." As followers of Jesus we state that this unity in our vision is not a political or ideological program but the cross of Jesus!

It is amazing how urgent all of this really is. During the conference on Religion after 9/11 held in Montréal in the autumn of 2006, the tragic shootings at Dawson College took place. It was interesting to me that two university colleagues and organisers of the conference were interviewed after the tragedy. The first stated, "I am deeply regretful...The trouble is, modern life is highly secular. Our need to latch on to something absolute goes into undesirable channels when denied." This person's solution was "Doing good helps." He often advises students to perform an act of kindness to someone else. The other was quoted, "Religion and its networks are the key to expressing our humanity...We need to connect." 31

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Leslie Newbigin, "Religious Pluralism and the Uniqueness of Jesus", IBMR, April 1989, pages 50-54.

These explicit statements of the centre of unity for our common humanity rooted in religion seem a rather bland solution to me. As followers of Jesus this unity in our vision is not a political or ideological program but the cross of Jesus!

Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8: 27-40 illustrates this. There are lots of things that could be said about this text.<sup>32</sup> It is another place to look for the centre of understanding human unity. I find it interesting that when Philip asks the Ethiopian, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The answer is very helpful for us today, "How can I unless someone *guides*<sup>33</sup> me." We rarely see witnessing as guiding/educating/leading the way. However, with those that are "culturally distant" maybe this is a new lens to understand our mission. The text begins in conflict<sup>34</sup> (26-29) is rooted in (the guiding into) the victory of Jesus (30-35)<sup>35</sup> and ends in the personal appropriation by the Ethiopian of the victory through the act of baptism (36-39)<sup>36</sup> Imagine the joy the man experienced as he kept reading Isaiah 56: 3-9,

Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from his people"; and let not the eunuch say, "Behold, I am a dry tree." For thus says the LORD: "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name, which shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, every one who keeps the Sabbath, and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> "Religious thinkers reflect on tragedy, The Montréal Gazette, Friday, September 15, 2006. page A 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Among some reflections that I like to highlight are (1) that this encounter is with a sexually-altered black Jew – undoubtedly the offspring of the Queen of Sheba's relationship with Solomon (1 Kings 10) (2) what would he be able to do in Jerusalem in light of Deuteronomy 23:1 "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD." And (3) Philip nominated as a deacon (Acts 6) really becomes the gatekeeper for the larger advancement of the mission of God to Samaritans and now Africans. Little wonder that Acts 21:8 refers to him as an evangelist – with four fine daughters recognised as prophetesses (Acts 21: 9)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup>The verb *hodégeò* means to lead the way – to cut a path.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> The conflict is about a black Jew, rejected by his own tradition because of his sexual change, coming back from a pilgrimage, not understanding the text and Philip's own dilemma of encountering this man, when he was "called to serve tables in Jerusalem."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> It is interesting to me that Philip does the Jesus thing by appropriating the verses of Isaiah for Jesus. This was a very radical way to read this text during Second temple Judaism.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> I really like the scribal addition to the text, "If you believe with all you heart, thou may. And he replied I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." It does not appear until the 6<sup>th</sup> century but it is great missiology!

GOD, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered."

Imagine...this man experiences Good News because of his encounter with Philip. Now he understood that he had a place in God's project in human history! Neither being a eunuch nor a foreigner prohibited him from following Jesus – the suffering servant.

The applications are wonderful for you and me. Philip was knowledgeable, bold, he listened to the angel (26) and the Holy Spirit (29). He *guided* the Ethiopian in his understanding of the text. The man's ethnic background and his sexuality (in light of the Old Testament) did not sidetrack him.

I sense that in our culture and our urban settings that announcing the Good News<sup>37</sup> (generally referred to as evangelism or proclamation) will more and more be a question of *being a witness of Jesus - guiding people to faith in Christ.* In David Watson's book, *I Believe in Evangelism*, he does not even treat the word *to witness – marteureò* in his analysis. Michael Green does better in his wonderful text, *Evangelism in the Early Church* <sup>38</sup> I have had great insights into using this notion of witness from two books, *Walking with the Poor* by Bryant Myers<sup>39</sup> and *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* by Darrel Guder<sup>40</sup>.

We can therefore state that the comprehensiveness of the mission of the Church in the city requires the proclamation of the gospel, the planting and nurture of congregations, and the application of the principles of Christ's lordship to all areas of community life. It means concern for all that is city, even for the cosmos above and beneath the city, from the quality of the air people breathe to the purity of the water in the river and canals.

Mission is the embodiment by the whole community of the followers of Jesus of the whole task of God in their specific context for the sake of the whole world. "Mission is the church sent into the world to love, to serve, to preach, to heal, to liberate." This embodiment therefore cannot be separated from Christian spirituality. This means living fully in the world in union with Jesus Christ and his people and growing in conformity to his person. It is a grateful and heartfelt *yes* to God expressed both in act and attitude—the follower of Jesus lives in obedience and imitation of Jesus Christ and walks in the disciplined and maturing pattern of love for God. It is a process of being conformed to

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Evangelisation, therefore, is that set of contextual, intentional initiatives of the community of followers of Jesus within the mission of God to demonstrate in word and deed the offer that God gives to everyone to change one's way of living and follow Jesus in every area of life as Lord.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> See pages 70-77.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> See pages 2-4 and 204-244.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> See pages 49-70.

the image of Christ for the sake of others. Spirituality is the process of developing a deep relationship with God. It is also about how Christians live their faith in the world. Spirituality cannot be divorced from the struggle for justice and care for the poor and the oppressed.

Following Jesus in the city means getting serious about issues like good schools, responsible government, sanitation and clean streets, fairness in the marketplace and justice in the courts. It means working to eliminate squalor slums and every depressing condition that dishonours God by degrading human life. Once urban disciples see the big picture of what it means to be citizens of the Kingdom in the cities as they are, they begin to work from a new and enlarged perspective. Obedience to king Jesus takes them to every nook and cranny of city life. They find the challenges innumerable and the cost often high. But they know that while the dark powers are awesome, God's rule is greater and its advance is worth every sacrifice.

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