Prospects and Challenges of Church Planting in Urban Areas

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the challenges and prospects of Church Planting in Urban Areas, as it is evident that the intrigues of Church Planting in Urban centres and rural areas are not the same. The paper discussed Urbanization and its peculiarities and showed that the complex nature of the urban centres is throwing a significant challenge to the church in her bid to reach the urban centres with the gospel. People are already scattered in the cities, and the church's responsibility is to gather them. The complex nature of the urban centres, social menace, cost of living and economic demand, and competition from other religions and Christian denominations are some of the Urban Church Planting challenges. In examining the prospects and approaches in urban Church planting, the paper emphasises the importance of research and survey. The prospects and approaches discussed include homogenous Church planting, networking, and partnership, nurturing through small groups, church planting in the suburbs and slums, Pastor as Shepherd and Church planter, multiple approaches to Church planting and the role of the laity. In reaching the cities with the gospel, Church planting in the urban centres should be intentionally and strategically implemented. The study adopted the descriptive research design and participatory observation.

Keywords: Urban areas, Church planting, church prospects, church challenges.

INTRODUCTION

In reaching the world for Christ, it is the responsibility of the church to reach all humanity with the gospel and make them members of God's Kingdom. To do this, the church must reach out to people everywhere, whether in rural or urban centres. However, the focus of this paper is church planting in urban centres. The urban centres have a complex culture that makes urban life complex and challenging. While ancient cities are growing larger, smaller towns and villages of the past few decades are also expanding to become urban centres as a result of Urbanization. Urbanisation is a reality, as people of diverse backgrounds enter the cities from various settlements searching for survival. The current Urbanisation in the world is more than an economic and sociological reality; it is also a missiological reality that requires the church's response. The church must not fail to carry out the mandate of the great commission, as commanded by the Lord. This paper titled "Prospects and Challenges of Church Planting in the Urban Areas" examines Urbanization and its characteristics and what church planting in the city entails. It also looks into some challenges and presents approaches and prospects for urban church planting.

URBANIZATION AND THE PECULIARITIES OF THE URBAN CENTERS

Walters noted that defining the term urban is difficult, as an individual's viewpoint informs it, and it diversifies from country to country. The definition is informed by multiple factors, such as economic, cultural, demographic, and geographical. For example, in some developed countries, urban centres are defined by a population of 2,500 or more persons with a population density of 1,000 persons per square mile. In contrast, in some other nations, any town with at least ten

thousand people is urban. The availability of trade and market, manufacturing industries, and infrastructure are vital in defining an urban centre.[39] Urbanization refers to the process of creating cities, and the presence of a substantial number of people determines this. The size of the population, the density of people, and the complexity of the population determine the urbanised Centre, and the urban population varies from country to country. Some features are feasible in an urban centre, such as schools, banks, hospitals, and post offices. Others include government establishments, commercial activities, industries, administrative offices, and access to transportation.

Over 50 per cent of the world's population, both in the global north and south, currently lives in urban areas, and the United Nations projection has indicated that over 68 per cent of the world population is estimated to be urban dwellers by the year 2050.[40] According to Rheenen, urban culture is complex because there are many options, and the complexity of options makes urban life difficult. The urban centres are heterogeneous and pluralistic. People have become more job-oriented and less family-oriented. There is freedom, as urban people believe they can control and manipulate their world rather than live in submission.[41] Rheenen further submits that four realities characterise urban mentalities. These realities are the passion for commodities which consumes the people's consciousness; community disintegration due to the breakup of extended and nuclear families leading to intense loneliness; the complexity of every facet of urban life- religion and the material market place which results in innumerable options; and the cultural

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[39] Jeffrey K. Walters, "Effective Evangelism in the City: Donald McGavran's Missiology and Urban Context" (PhD Thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, 2010), 11-12

[40] Anthony Wagener Smith, "Urban Church Planting: Three Functional Shifts from the New Testament," *Journal of Adventist Mission studies* 15,1 (2019): 118

[41] Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Missions: Biblical Foundations & Contemporary Strategies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1996), 159-160.

relativism which promotes individualism.[42] It is evident from the work of Rheenen that urban culture is complex because there are many options. The complexity of options makes urban life difficult, as people are open to diverse cultures, and there are more religious options in the city. There is freedom and passion for material things.

Rheenen further submits that the urban church should seek to help the people come out of materialistic bondage and meet the needs of the victims of Urbanization. In addition, the urban church is to be a meaning maker by helping people find meaning in life; creating a community where there is love and fellowship; providing nurturing at an intimate level; and helping people overcome loneliness.[43] The urban church planter should understand these realities and provide ways to tackle them.

CHURCH PLANTING IN THE URBAN CENTERS

In examining church planting in urban centres, it is expedient to consider what it is all about. According to Wagner, church planting establishes and reproduces communities of believers in Christ Jesus through evangelism and discipleship to fulfil biblical purposes under local spiritual leaders. It is the practice of establishing a core of Christian worshippers in a local assembly to develop into a thriving congregation.[44] On the other hand, Patterson noted that Church planting goes beyond just starting a church among people; it involves establishing a church that grows and reproduces spontaneously. The goal of any church planting, whether rural or urban, is to raise "obedient disciples who also disciple other unreached people groups.[45] Urban church planting is more than starting a new

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[42] Rheenen, 160-161.

[43] Ibid, 160-161.

[44] Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest* (Ventura: Regel Books, 1990), 11

[45] George Patterson, "The Spontaneous Multiplication of Churches," in Ralph D. Winter and Stevens C. Hawthorne (eds), *Perspectives on the*

worship service; it should be seen as ministry planting rather than church planting; and a spiritual reality that no human leader can do it all.[46]   By referring to church planting as ministry planting, Smith meant that urban church planting is ministry teamwork which is more of equippers than performers. Teamwork is particularly relevant for church planting success within diverse and multifaceted urban contexts.

Ortiz observed that the church's concerns and mission in the early twentieth century did not favour the city; hence there is a need for a better engagement between the church and the city in the twenty-first century. He argued that the church as the community of God's Kingdom and the people of God are responsible for societal transformation. She is to bring God's people together in worship under the Kingship of Christ, in which Christ dwells and is recognised as the head.[47]   It is the church's responsibility to get involved in urban church planting, considering the ongoing Urbanisation and Urbanism, which have become the modern way of life as people worldwide are entering the cities.[48]

Ortiz further observed that the church has been slow in responding to this trend that has been on since the last century. Citing Conn, Ortiz noted that Paul's theology was greatly nurtured in urban mission since his missionary enterprise took him through the great cities of Philippi, Thessalonica and Corinth in the Greco-Roman world. He further noted that the New Testament was written mainly within an urban missionary context.[49] In line with the submission of Ortiz, it is evident that God is interested in urban church planting and is intentionally

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World Christian Movement: A Reader Revised Edition (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1992), D 76.

[46] Smith, 123

[47] Ortiz, 44 – 45.

[48] Ibid, 46.

[49] Ibid, 46.

bringing the people to the city so that the gospel of Christ can impact more people as the church reaches them right there in the city.

Smith, citing Alison, noted that the "biblical teaching of the church as people on mission, rather than a program in a building, complements temple imagery as the foundation for a functional shift in church planting." Furthermore, the word for Church in the New Testament (ekklesia), used 115 times, was never once referred to as a physical building. It referred to universal geographical reality, those with city-wide affinity, and groups who meet in homes. The New Testament expression of the church is more descriptive than prescriptive.[50] Smith then submitted that building a biblical church does not necessarily mean a physical building.   Biblical church planting involves building a healthy context for church gatherings and physical spaces. Even when resources exist to acquire first-rate buildings in urban areas for church planting, if the founding members cannot function without a building, their missional impact, multiplication potential and survivability are weak.[51] Urban church planting is rooted in the scriptures.

CHALLENGES OF URBAN CHURCH PLANTING

The intrigues of Church Planting in Urban centres and rural areas are not the same. Urban church planting in Africa is becoming more complex, difficult and expensive, considering the current trend of Urbanization in Africa. The complexity of the urban centres' sociocultural, economic and political situation is throwing a significant challenge to the church in her bid to reach the urban centres with the gospel. Social menace, cost of implication, raising committed members, and competition among the body of Christ are some challenges

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[50] Smith, 120

[51] Ibid, 122.

facing Urban Church Planting. This paper now examines the following challenges:

THE COMPLEXITY OF THE URBAN CENTERS

Randy White had submitted that the urban missionaries and church planters could become distressed and overwhelmed by the size, mixed multitude, language and cultural diversity as they are faced with the task of blending and manoeuvring through the complex language and cultural differences.[52] Urban culture is complex; it provides many options, and the complexity of options makes urban life difficult. People have become more job oriented and less family-oriented.[53] The urban church planters and missionaries should understand that each city is unique and peculiar. Therefore, they should learn to understand the behaviour, attitude and characteristics of the city they serve.

Social Menace

In his book, The Next Christendom, Jenkins noted that rural areas in the past few decades have become urbanised, and millions of people are migrating to large, attractive urban centres. As people enter the cities, they are separated from their local roots and lose communal life. Some found themselves living on the fringes of the cities and faced suffering and hardship. The cities' unavailability or inadequacy of social amenities, job opportunities, and social injustice are increasing. [54] Despite these sufferings and hardships, people kept coming to the urban centres with the hope and aspirations of getting a better livelihood and securing new political and social autonomy. Jenkins then observed that "in such settings, the most devoted and fundamentalist-oriented religious

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[52] Randy White, *Encounter God in the City* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 68-69.

[53] Rheenen, 159-160.

[54] Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 72.

communities emerge to provide functional alternative arrangements for health, education and people's welfare."[55] To this effect, the church, particularly the new charismatic and Pentecostal churches, explores this medium by providing the social, material, and economic needs the city's administrations fail to deliver. The church's involvement in meeting needs gives the church opportunities to win more members[56]   the implication of this on the urban church planting is both a challenge and a prospect.

It is a challenge because providing social amenities such as schools, clinics/hospitals are capital intensive, particularly if the urban church is financially incapacitated. However, churches can handle this by joining partnerships and networking, while some basic livelihood needs could be met. It is a prospect in that the church meets society's needs, provides an avenue to win more converts, and provides psychological and Pastoral support. The church should also engage in providing justice by fighting social injustice. The writer believes that the church should maintain a balance as it provides justice and charity. While justice has to do with seeking to restore the dignity of humanity, charity has to do with helping people in a particularly terrible situation. Charity is a means to an end and not an end in itself. Hence, the church should realise that it is not a long-term solution. One-way giver-receiver direction should not last; the receiver should be helped to move to the giver's side.

Cost of Living and Economic Demands

The cost of living is generally higher in the cities than in rural areas. The financial implication of planting a new church in urban centres is usually higher than in rural areas. For example, acquiring land property in the city is usually higher than in the rural setting. Momoh, Opaluwa and Albeera noted

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[55] Jenkins, 73.

[56] Ibid, 73.

that Urbanization makes urban centres a whirlpool of economic activities and industrialisation, resulting in the shortage of economic, social and infrastructural facilities. Hence, it leads to a high cost of living, particularly in acquiring accommodation and landed property, as the people are jostling for the limited amenities. The high number of rural dwellers who had also abandoned agricultural activities in the rural arrears by migrating to the cities in search of jobs has led to a high decline in agricultural activities, which has resulted in the importation of food, particularly staple foods. Therefore, it has subjected food prices in Nigeria to international price influence, which constantly lies above the average earning power of the people.[57] It also posed a significant challenge to church planting in the urban centres, as the church had to compete for scarce commodities, particularly accommodation and landed property.

Competition from other Religions and Christian Denominations

The pluralistic nature of the cities promotes competition and allows the people in the city to have options. Adesanya noted that church planting today is becoming more challenging as some Churches are abusing the idea behind church planting to the extent that there is currently unhealthy rivalry, competition and contestation for the limited space.[58] Today, one can easily see two or more churches in one building or on the street when moving around a city on Sunday morning. The presence of Islam and African Traditional religions also allows people in the city to have options, promoting competition. There is rivalry and contestation as each group is contending for the limited space and winning more followers.

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[57] Job Momoh, Akor Opaluwa and Haithem Albeera, "Challenges Facing Nigeria's Urban Environment: The Abuja Case," *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa 20, 2* (2018): 43-45.

[58] Olusola Ibiyinka Adesanya, "Church Planting and the Attendant Challenges in the Ekiti Province of the Redeemed Christian Church of God," *International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Management studies, 4,12* (2018): 6.

PROSPECTS AND APPROACHES

In the book, Discovering the Mission of God, Rebekah Naylor noted that the resources are already in the harvest, as human resources needed for the Christian missions are already there in the church. She argued that Jesus' Ministry-teaching, preaching and healing took place throughout Galilee and in his homeland of Jerusalem. The disciples of Jesus were not to pray that God would raise believers from far countries to come to Israel and do ministry. In reality, Jesus' disciples came from within the region.[59]   Since people are not within the same vicinity in the cities, the church should be a gathering place for them to hear the gospel. It is the church's responsibility to gather those dispersed in the city. The church should stop seeing the city as the Centre of evil but as an opportunity for missions. This section looks at the prospects and approaches to urban church planting as the church seeks to gather the scattered people in the cities.

Research and Survey

James Engel noted that urban ministry is the greatest challenge to world evangelisation. Because of its complex mosaics and increasing resistance to traditional evangelistic methods. He further noted that meeting this challenge requires contextualised strategies through planning that is based on an accurate understanding of those to be reached. He advocated for openness to the leadership of the Holy Spirit through intuition, experience and research.[60] Affirming the necessity of the leadership of the Holy Spirit in church planting, Payne submitted that church planting is Spirit-guided, for church planting without the leading and the backing of the Holy Spirit

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[59]Rebekah A. Naylor, 'Breaking Old Habit,' in Mike Barnett, *Discovering the Mission of God: Best Missional Practices for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2012), 204.

[60] James R. Engel, "Using Research Strategically in Urban Ministry" Conn, Harvie M. *Planting and Growing Urban Churches*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1997), 46.

is labour in vanity.[61]   The religious beliefs and attitudes, motivations and needs, and receptivity level of the diverse people of the targeted urban area must be researched and understood. The understanding derived from the research will help develop the appropriate strategies[62] for urban church planting. The Pastor and the Church should get to know their community, go around to see where and how people live, hear and listen to their discussions, observe the children play, and get to know the demography.

Paul was an experienced urban church planter, as evident in his work at Derbe, Lystra, Troas, Neapolis, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Athens. Paul was able to understand the realities of the cities and gathered intelligence and information while he was interacting with the people. With the example of Athens, Randy White noted that by interacting with the religious community, placing himself in the marketplace, and interacting with the academy, Paul understood the city's behaviour, attitude and characteristics.[63]   Urban church planting requires an understanding of the sociological realities of those cities to "envision what culturally relevant churches might look like and how they might be planted among the various unreached peoples we find within those cities."[64] With the findings from the research, the church can mobilise and train its members to become strategically involved in urban church planting.

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[61] J. D. Payne, "Mission and Church Planting," Bruce Riley Ashford ed., *Theology and Practice of Mission: God, The Church and the Nations,* (Nashville Tennessee: B & H Publishing Group, 2011), 205-206

[62] Engel, 47-48.

[63] White, 69-72.

[64] John Holzmann, "Caleb Project Research Expeditions," Conn, Harvie M. *Planting and Growing Urban Churches*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1997), 53