

# STAINED **GLASS** Urbanism

The Untold Story of  
the Church and City Renewal

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# The Missional Church And Sustainable Cities

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## INTRODUCTION

What contributes to sustainable urban growth and development? This is a common question of concern facing all participants in this year's World Urban Forum, from urban planners and urban business professionals to Non-Governmental Organizations and local community associations and groups.<sup>1</sup> The focus of the forum this year is on "turning ideas into action." From this diverse group of stakeholders has emerged a number of key areas for dialogue and action, attempting to address this shared concern. This list includes: urban planning and management, energy policies and practices, urban safety and security, affordable housing and infrastructure development, to name a few.<sup>2</sup>

These observations lead us to the question at the heart of this paper: What is the role of faith-communities in the growth and development of sustainable cities? It is striking that this type of question rarely, if ever, enters the discussion around planning for urban development and sustainability. It is encouraging to see that one of the mobile workshops at the World Planners Conference, a gathering of urban planners from around the world that is being held in Vancouver prior to the World Urban Forum, highlights the role that faith communities have in shaping and influencing their neighbourhoods.<sup>3</sup> However, it is fair to say that among urban planners and other urban civic and business professionals there remains a lack of understanding concerning the potential contribution of faith communities to urban centres.<sup>4</sup> What exactly is the role of faith communities in our urban centres? How could these communities contribute to their sustainability?

The contribution of this paper to that conversation will be quite specific. The focus will be to assess the potential contribution of one stream of faith communities in our urban centres: the emergence of "missional churches." Among Christian faith-communities throughout North America, "missional churches" represent an emerging movement that is bringing renewal and transformation to many Christian churches of diverse backgrounds and traditions.<sup>5</sup> At the heart of this movement is the effort among these Christian churches to be actively engaged in their local communities, and to contribute to the health and vitality of their cities.

1. See brochure and program outline for the 2006 World Urban Forum. Available at : [http://www.unhabitat.org/wuf/2006/documents/WUF3Bro\\_small.pdf](http://www.unhabitat.org/wuf/2006/documents/WUF3Bro_small.pdf).
2. See list of "Dialogues" for the 2006 World Urban Forum at: [http://www.wuf3-fum3.ca/en/agenda\\_dialogues.shtml](http://www.wuf3-fum3.ca/en/agenda_dialogues.shtml).
3. See the program brochure available at: [http://www.mppi.mb.ca/conferences/2006/WPC2006\\_PrelimProg.pdf](http://www.mppi.mb.ca/conferences/2006/WPC2006_PrelimProg.pdf).
4. See Michael Van Pelt and Richard Greydanus, *Living on the Streets: The Role of the Church in Urban Renewal* for a description and one explanation of this reality.
5. This movement has spread beyond North America, to include local expressions in Western Europe, southern Africa, and Australia/New Zealand. Our focus will be on the North American context and specifically focus on the Canadian context. See, for example the following: <http://www.gocn.org/>; <http://www.deepsight.org/deepsight/ds.htm>; and <http://www.gospel-culture.org.uk/>.

The issues facing our cities are diverse and complex. The need for collaboration among diverse stakeholders is widely recognized. While the contribution of “missional churches” is limited in scope, the role of these churches can be significant. In order to demonstrate this we will look at three key contributions of missional churches to their urban neighbourhoods: bridging social capital, partners in community development, and agents of vocational and cultural renewal.

## BRIDGING SOCIAL CAPITAL

The importance of social capital for sustainable cities is widely recognized. On a global scale, the World Bank continues to look at the importance of social capital or “social cohesion” in order for societies and cities to prosper and for development to be sustainable.<sup>6</sup> As they see it, “social capital refers to the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society’s social interactions.” In the Canadian context we are indebted to the work of Jane Jacobs and her ability to inspire us to see the interconnected webs and layers in our cities, particularly in our local neighbourhoods and streets, and to discover how people interact with the rich tapestry of life in urban neighbourhoods.<sup>7</sup>

The benefits of social capital for cities and urban neighbourhoods are manifold. Citing Robert Putnam’s work, Mark Smith mentions a few of the concrete benefits: child development is powerfully improved by strong social capital; public spaces are cleaner; people are friendlier; streets are safer; institutions and businesses flourish; and individual health and well-being improve.<sup>8</sup> For urban growth and development to be sustainable, the strength of social capital should be of vital concern and a central element in the discussion. Let us consider a couple of the key components in the development of strong social capital in urban communities.

Putnam’s work and others like Fukuyama have demonstrated that two of the key components for building strong social capital are trust and interpersonal connectedness.<sup>9</sup> One challenge facing our urban centres is the incredible array of diversity, and the potential threats and challenges this diversity brings to sustaining trust and interpersonal connections. Nick Pearce cites recent evidence “marshaled by theorists of social capital, particularly in the USA, that increased ethnic diversity is associated with lower levels of trust and civic-ness between citizens.”<sup>10</sup> Ethnic diversity is only one variable of diversity. Our urban centres are noted for their rich diversity along many lines: social, economic, worldview, religious, education, employment, and housing.

Pearce argues that trust is not necessarily at odds with increased diversity, and that trust is not achievable through political action or urban planning policy: “Interpersonal trust and civic belonging are themselves often forged through social struggles, and the creation and maintenance of institutions and practices that generate and sustain other-regarding virtues.”<sup>11</sup> What types of institutions exist in our cities that “generate and sustain other-regarding virtues?” In other words, what institutions do we find in our cities that have the potential to develop and sustain what social capital theorists refer to as “bridging” social capital: the kind of social capital that accommodates diversity and is able to encompass people of many different social groups we find in our urban centres?

6. See [www1.worldbank.org/prem/poverty/scapital/whatsc.htm](http://www1.worldbank.org/prem/poverty/scapital/whatsc.htm) for details on their extensive international work on measuring and strengthening social capital.

7. See especially *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 1996, New York: Random House.

8. M.K. Smith, “Social Capital,” *The Encyclopedia of Informal Education*, 2001 [www.infed.org/biblio/social\\_capital.htm](http://www.infed.org/biblio/social_capital.htm)

9. R.D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone. The collapse and revival of American community*, 2000, New York: Simon and Schuster and Fukuyama, F. *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*, 1996, New York: Free Press.

10. N. Pearce, “Diversity versus Solidarity: A New Progressive Dilemma?,” 2004, Available at: [http://www.whitlam.org/its\\_time/19/pearce.html](http://www.whitlam.org/its_time/19/pearce.html). Pearce cites the work.

11. *Ibid.*

In a recent study focused on Canadian cities, Aizlewood and Pendakur demonstrate that ethno-cultural diversity is not a major factor for the accumulation of social capital in Canada as it is in the United States.<sup>12</sup> Rather, the dominating factor that affects social capital in Canada is community size:

In three of the five models – participation, interpersonal trust and seeing friends – the larger the city of residence, the less likely people are to participate, trust, and socialize. Generalized trust in cities is reduced because familiarity is a more selective, network-based phenomenon.<sup>13</sup>

So the problem seems to be in the very process of urbanization – the larger the city, the greater the negative effect on social capital. What is striking is the remedy suggested by this study – higher levels of education and income. Simply stated, the higher the levels of education and income among urban dwellers, the greater the social capital.

“Based on our research, controlling diversity is neither justifiable nor realistic, but more importantly, does not appear to be the answer. Education and income appear to be far more effective levers for affecting social capital.”

Are these the only “levers for affecting social capital” in our Canadian cities? What about the institution of the church – particularly, emerging missional churches? Missional churches are churches that recognize the power of their associational life to generate and sustain the “other-regarding” virtues so vital to the strength of bridging social capital. Missional churches will often refer to themselves as “alternative communities” and by this they have in mind the power of communal life together that is marked by its diversity and embrace of the “other.” This is striking. Historically, churches have likely been noted, instead, for their “bonding social capital”: the strong social cohesion that often functioned to exclude those who were “other” or different. Increasingly, missional churches are reflecting the diversity of their urban neighbourhoods and demonstrating a capacity for fostering connection and trust among a diversity of people.<sup>14</sup>

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This capacity has been noted by urban pastor and missiologist Mark Gornik in his celebrated *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City*. Gornik argues that we need a structural change in our whole way of thinking about sustainable cities and the role of the church. Often advocates of a civil society look to the role of churches as “mediating institutions” which, along with other local community groups of this category, provide a buffer between the market economy and the government. Churches are much more than this, argues Gornik. Missional churches are “living communities of truth, grace, and reconciliation” where Christian identity cuts across every other dividing line found in our urban neighbourhoods.<sup>15</sup>

12. Amanda Aizlewood and Ravi Pendakur, 2004, “Ethnicity and Social Capital in Canada”, Strategic Research and Analysis, Department of Canadian Heritage, Government of Canada, p. 18.

13. Aizlewood and Pendakur, 19.

14. See *Living on the Streets: The Role of the Church in Urban Renewal*, Work Research Foundation, 2005, Michael Van Pelt and Richard Greydanus. This study documents the way missional churches in Hamilton, ON are transcending the diverse social boundaries that have existed in urban neighbourhoods (p. 19-20).

15. Mark Gornik, *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City*, 2002, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, p. 18-19.

These communities have the resources and capacity not only to engender “other-regarding virtues,” but to be places where bridging social capital is nurtured and experienced in the urban neighbourhoods of our cities.<sup>16</sup> At the heart of this dynamic is the ability of these missional church communities to locate identity and the personal contribution of diverse community members in categories that supercede economic, educational, or ethnic stratification and diversity. Simply put, they live together in “reconciled diversity” that helps them form “alternative communities” where the “other” is embraced and encouraged to contribute. For these churches, their ability to embrace the “other” and live in community amidst a rich ethnic, social, economic, educational, and employment diversity is central to their mission and a powerful witness to their message.<sup>17</sup>

## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Missional churches are building on a tradition of faith-communities who actively engage in local community development. While recent studies, particularly in the U.S., indicate that the contribution of faith-communities to urban community development is not always as grandiose as some recent advocates of “Faith-Based Initiatives,” have suggested, there is a long history in both the U.S. and Canada of strong faith-community involvement in community development and social services.<sup>18</sup> Of particular interest are the contributions made by missional churches who are involved in “asset-based community development.”

16. Gornik cites the important study done in the US by Mark Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*, Princeton University Press, 2001. As noted on the back

of this book, Warren “offers the first in-depth treatment of how to rebuild the social capital of America’s communities while promoting racially

inclusive, democratic participation.” Warren looks particularly at the vital role of religious congregations in this process.

17. See L. Barret, *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (2004): 74-83.

18. See A. Farnsely, “Assessing the Roles of Faith-Based Organizations in Community Development,” *Recent Research Results*, November 2001,

pp. 1-2 and Ron Cnaan, “Our Hidden Safety Net,” *Brookings Review* 17, no. 2, Spring 1999, pp. 50-53. For a more balanced perspective on

the US situation, see *A Revolution of Compassion: Faith-Based Groups as Full Partners in Fighting America’s Social Problem* by Dave Donaldson

and Stanley Carlson-Thies.

“All the kids I grew up with are either dead, in jail, blown away by drugs, or freaked out on Jesus”, remarked one interviewee from the city of Camden in *Time*. Tony Campolo reflects on this interview, in *Revolution and Renewal: How Churches are Saving Our Cities*:

I was glad to hear that this young man was aware that, for some of his friends, Jesus has proven to be a live option. Being converted to Jesus has been the exit route from despair for hundreds of kids who have found themselves trapped in such desperate settings. But for everyone of them who is rescued, there seem to be ten new victims who fall prey to the diabolical social forces at work in such neighborhoods.

Those committed to urban youth ministry are often tempted to experience a sense of futility about what they do. Day by day, as they pick up the individual casualties of a pathological social system, there is a growing awareness that what they are doing is not going to turn the tide against despair. They realize that it is not just individuals who have to be changed. Sooner or later, the social system itself must be changed so that it doesn’t turn out so many victims...

There is no difficulty getting church people on board to support the efforts to rescue and restore the broken young people that the political-economic system spews out with painful regularity. But organizing for the kind of social action that is required to challenge those who maintain the oppressive social system raises all kind of questions for them. When questions are

raised about the strategies of corporate executives whose decisions cripple local economies and leave uncoun­ted workers without jobs, some people wonder whether Christians messing around with things that are none of their business. When labor unions are challenged for discriminating practices that keep African-Americans or Latinos from having a fair chance at high-paying blue-collar employment, there are those who say that we are butting into situations where we don't belong...

[And] In the past I may not have been so sure that trying to change social structures was an integral part of the Christian missionary enterprise. But nowadays it all seems very clear. To attack the evils that have taken hold and pervaded urban social structures is obviously a part of the church mission... I have watched as evil social forces have organized to turn the city streets on which carefree kids once played into dangerous places. I am now absolutely convinced that the church that does not address the systemic evils that are eating up the cities of America is not living out its calling. Our task, says the scriptures, is to "destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8), and those works seem nowhere more evident than in the politics and economies that are at work destroying our "alabaster cities."

Anyone familiar with community development theory and practice will know the work of John McKnight of Northwestern University and his leadership of the "asset-based community development" institute.<sup>19</sup> McKnight's work extends to Canada and is beginning to take hold in various cities and local communities. A notable example is the profound influence of the "asset-based community development" movement in the community-based research network of Ottawa.<sup>20</sup> This approach to community developments focuses effort on five categories of community resources that are leveraged for development: the skills and talents of people; network of voluntary associations; strengths of local institutions; physical property and land; and the local economy.

Rans and Altman argue that faith-communities have two particularly significant contributions to make in asset-based community development: community organization and partnerships in development.<sup>21</sup> The tradition of faith-based community organizing has a track-record of benefiting local community development efforts along various lines: contribution of leaders to community efforts; contribution of physical meeting space and presence in local community; added "moral authority" to community agenda items; and contribution of funds and other human resources to build stronger communities.<sup>22</sup>

Building on this legacy, missional churches are finding their places as real partners in urban community development work. Their contribution to this is based on their assets as genuine community partners. Rans and Altman indicate the particularly unique position of missional churches in helping identify and mobilize community assets; in aligning the resources within their own faith-community with

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the community assets; investing in community relationship building to create connections between community partners; and their contribution as powerful institutions in local communities.<sup>23</sup>

19. See their site: <http://www.northwestern.edu/ipr/abcd.html>.

20. See, for example: [http://www.spcottawa.on.ca/BRNO\\_website/Participatory\\_Social\\_Research.htm](http://www.spcottawa.on.ca/BRNO_website/Participatory_Social_Research.htm). Edmonton, Victoria, Vancouver, and Kitchener-Waterloo are other Canadian cities who are effectively engaging the asset-based tools for community planning and development.

See <http://www.neighbourtoneighbour.ca/links.html> for links.

21. "Asset-Based Strategies for Faith Communities," Chicago: ACTS Publications, 2002.

22. "Asset-Based Strategies for Faith Communities," p. 5.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-8.

These potential contributions of missional churches to our urban landscape are fitting for the Canadian context. A study conducted by the Council of Europe on cultural policy and cultural diversity in Canada bears this out.<sup>24</sup> According to this study, one of the pressing needs at the Canadian urban micro-level is the need for building better linkages between urban planning and community development. In particular, this study notes that the need for urban planning to adequately deal with issues of cultural diversity will require not only changing perspective in planning theory but engaging in planning practices that carefully examine and listen to the local institutions that shape urban development and cultural life.<sup>25</sup> The need is for “building multi-sector partnerships linking grassroots groups, government, business, academia, media, and non-governmental organizations in each city” (48). Missional churches are one set of partners at the local level that have the potential to contribute to this linkage between urban planning and grassroots urban community development partners.

For missional churches, this partnership and collaboration with other urban community development partners is another central aspect to their mission and vision as an institution. They see their public service and partnership in community development as their public witness in local neighbourhoods – a notion much broader than older notions of “proselytizing” or other efforts focused on institutional growth and success. At the heart of their self-identity is their desire to seek the broader well-being and vitality of their neighbourhood – an identity that is rooted for them in the belief in a complete transformation of the entirety of human life.<sup>26</sup> This vision of missional churches is not specific to the North American context as recent work on an international scale has demonstrated the possibilities and power of missional churches in a variety of urban community development work.<sup>27</sup>

## VOCATIONAL AND CULTURAL RENEWAL

One of the challenges in effective urban planning is developing policies and strategies for planning that publicly engage the diversity of urban dwellers. Indeed, the challenges around this whole theme are the focus of one of the major dialogue sub-themes at the World Urban Forum this year. No doubt part of what contributes to the growing complexity of this challenge is not only the diverse immigrant and ethnic populations in our major cities, but the growing differentiation of urban networks no longer defined solely by neighbourhood location. This is the challenge of connecting various urban networks, so aptly described as the “engines of urban sustainability” by one of the networking event planners for the World Urban Forum.<sup>28</sup>

By “urban networks,” we do not have in mind the innovative design concept of Peter Calthorpe, founder of the Congress for New Urbanism.<sup>29</sup> Rather, we have in mind the specialized networks found in every major urban centre. The networks that are often found in the different vocational sectors of the city: legal, health care, finance, education, and marketing, to name a few. Increasingly, these formal and informal networks are some of the main conduits through which urban dwellers

24. Greg Baeker, “National Report: Canada,” Council of Europe Transversal Study Project on *Cultural Policy and Cultural Diversity*, 2001. Found at: [http://www.coe.int/T/E/Cultural\\_Co-operation/culture/Completed\\_projects/Transversal/CCCUlt\\_2001\\_5\\_EN.pdf?L=E](http://www.coe.int/T/E/Cultural_Co-operation/culture/Completed_projects/Transversal/CCCUlt_2001_5_EN.pdf?L=E).

25. Baeker, p. 47ff.

26. See M. Minatrea, *Shaped By God's Heart: The Passion and Practice of Missional Churches*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004: p. 126-140.

27. See “Towards the Transformation of Our Cities/Regions,” Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 37, produced for the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization in Pattaya, Thailand, September 9 to October 5, 2004. Accessed at: [http://community.gospelcom.net/lcwe/assets/LOP37\\_JG8.pdf](http://community.gospelcom.net/lcwe/assets/LOP37_JG8.pdf)

28. This particular networking and training event is being planned by “Federacion Latinoamericana de Ciudades, Municipios y Asociaciones (FLACMA), see brochure, p. 6.

29. See, <http://www.calthorpe.com/> for a sampling of Peters’ influential work and theory.

connect and find community. Missional churches are sensitive to these urban dynamics and, have the potential to contribute to the creation of these urban networks and, through them, become agents of vocational and cultural renewal. Let's consider this briefly.

First, missional churches are intentional in the creation of urban vocational networks. Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City is one example of a missional church that is intentional in the creation of urban networks. Currently they have six networks formed whose goals are to equip, connect and mobilize leaders in their professional and industry sectors toward excellence for the common good of the city.<sup>30</sup> What is the value of urban networks for sustainability of our cities?

On the one hand urban networks offer peer support for urban dwellers who strive for excellence in their vocational work in these various sectors. The added value of peer support networks and informal community gatherings is hard to quantify, but no doubt the liveability of urban neighbourhoods is dependent on the webs of connection among urban people, their spaces, and their places of work. New Urbanism planning is sensitive to these realities and intentional in the design and creation of space that fosters connections among different spheres of urban life.

Urban vocational networks are also agents of vocational renewal. Missional churches emphasize the creation of networks that contribute to cultural production, and they strive to share best practices that motivate toward excellence in the workplace. The goal is not "value-assimilation" but, rather, engagement in vocational life in a way that contributes to vocational excellence and renewal. At Redeemer Presbyterian, New York City, this has led to the cultivation of an "Entrepreneurship Forum" whose aim is to establish an infrastructure to advise, serve, and fund Christian entrepreneurs who seek to create city-changing, culture-renewing ventures.<sup>31</sup> What other institution in our cities is seeking to intentionally create urban networks and leverage them to foster vocational and culture renewing ventures?

**“THESE ARE NOT CHURCHES  
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GHETTOIZED ISOLATION”**

For missional churches, the passion for networks and vocational renewal is rooted in their desire to nurture communities in which Christians are equipped to work with distinctiveness while being engaged in cultural production. Missional churches are devoted to supporting people in their vocational fields out of concern for the well-being of their cities and the belief in the inherent goodness of their vocational lives and cultural production. These are not churches seeking to exist in ghettoized isolation where value assimilation is the goal destination for their educational activities. Instead, these churches have shifted to a paradigm where the focus of their educational activities is the nurturing of urban vocational networks.<sup>32</sup> With this focus, these churches aim to make a vital contribution to the common good of our cities and to the various professional and industry sectors that compose our urban landscapes.

## CONCLUSION

Sustainable cities are a common concern for both the urban planner and the missional church. This is a concern rooted in different motivations and shaped by divergent traditions. Yet the emergence of missional churches can be seen as another bright spot on the urban landscape, a new stakeholder

30. See <http://www.faithandwork.org/> for a description of these groups and the type of activities. There are currently networks in the following sectors: arts, education, financial services, health care, legal, and marketing/advertising.

31. See <http://www.faithandwork.org/forum.php> for details.

32. See Tim Keller, *The Missional Church*, June 2001, found at: <http://www.redeemer2.com/resources/papers/missional.pdf>

committed to the vitality and sustainability of our urban centres or a major player in sustainable urban growth and development.

This paper has argued that regardless of your answer, the missional church is a contributor that should not be ignored, particularly when we move from the macro to the micro level and do the hard work of “turning ideas into action”—the theme of this year’s World Urban Forum. Missional churches are institutions and faith-communities committed to our increasingly urban world and its realities. They possess the resources and potential to make a contribution in bridging social capital, partnering in community development, and functioning as agents of vocational and cultural renewal. They are impelled by a vision that looks to an urban future for all humanity – an urban future noted for its rich diversity, wild beauty, and life-giving vitality.