

# URBAN POOR MISSION

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## THE LANDSCAPE FOR MISSION HAS SHIFTED

There are now more people living in cities than in rural areas. Millions migrate to cities everyday all over the world. The world has shifted radically from a rural agricultural population to an urban population because to many, cities are where the money and employment can be found.

I have taught urban poor church planting for almost twenty years and occasionally I need to challenge a student or two who insists in doing rural church planting. I tell them that within five years after they have planted a church in the rural areas, most of the members of his church will already be in my church in the slums here in Metro Manila.

Urban poor church planting is far more logistically feasible than church planting in rural areas. I can walk ten kilometers in the province and maybe only meet ten or twenty families I can share the gospel with. While here in Metro Manila, I can walk within one kilometer in the neighborhood and meet more than a thousand families.

People come to the cities for jobs. But most of them find housing in cities as very expensive. So many city migrants end up in the slums or informal squatter settlements. This is the reason why we have targeted the slums for church planting. If you want to share the gospel to people who have never heard the gospel and you want to share it to the greatest number of people, go to the slums, here or anywhere in the world.

## THE SLUM AREAS AS MISSION FIELDS

I have visited most of these slums here and abroad. I have slept one night in the worse slum in Cape Town (Khayelitsha) where people say, you won't last a day and not get killed. Our group has helped start a ministry also in the worse slum in Chicago (Lawndale) where at that time you could buy a house for a couple of hundred dollars but you would be dead in 24 hours (because of so many "drive by shootings"). I have also been to the largest slum in the world (Dharavi, Mumbai).

Most of my work in the Philippines is looking for new slums where our organization, Companion with the Poor, can begin a church planting ministry. We have planted almost a hundred churches, all in the slums, in the last twenty years or more. Our group looks for the poorest slums where there is no church yet. We will not plant or start a church planting project in a community where there is already an existing church. Companion with the Poor is very small and has very little resources. If we want to have any impact at all in

world mission, we will only go to the communities no one else wants. No decent church would want to go to the poorest slums.

One time, I did a courtesy call on several churches in the coastal road area of Cavite. I told them I need their blessings and permission to plant a church in a slum community nearby. All of them unanimously discouraged me from going there because no church would survive, as there would be no income from tithes or offerings.

And yet, to reach the whole country for Christ, we need to go to where the masses are. Ninety percent (90%) of the masses in the Philippines are poor and are found in slum areas. And only few churches have a burden to reach out these poor communities because of many factors like finances, safety and lack of willing workers. But to us in Compassion with the Poor, Slums are the best place to start a ministry and plant a church.

## BUT NO ONE WANTS TO GO TO THE POOR

The biggest mistake of the first American missionaries who came to evangelize the Philippines was to target the rich and educated Filipinos. The first one hundred years of American mission in the Philippines hardly made a dent as a result of that defective strategy. They also believed that if they could convert the rich and educated, these converts would exert a powerful influence on society, thus, even solving poverty in the process.

My professor in my doctoral studies said, 87% of Filipinos who go to the USA for further seminary studies never return to the Philippines.

The Navigators targeted the best schools, like University of the Philippines, to disciple the best Filipinos. I was one of them. But none of those I knew in the Navigators wanted to go to the poor. As far as Filipino Christian workers were concerned, their goal was to go up, to eat the same food, live in the same house and drive the same car as their American mentors. Going to seminary implied seeking a higher salary but eventually, the only way up was to go to America.

American Christianity peddled not just Jesus but also the American lifestyle. Little did they realize they were making people more American than Christian when they evangelized the people in the country. For many converts, being poor was looked down, it was a demotion to go to the slums.

Christianity began to spread in the Philippines only when the church started to go to the masses. The charismatic movement and the Pentecostal

denomination spearheaded the drive downwards.

I got out of one of the largest Pentecostal churches after one Sunday service (one out of ten services that Sunday) in Chennai, India and saw the people streaming out like ants and blocked an 8-lane highway.

The people from squatter areas have come to worship the Lord in big numbers!

I was one of the leaders in an evangelism consultation in London one time, and also in Paris, another time. In both events, the leaders were all complaining about how difficult it was to evangelize the city (Paris or London). But at each conference, when I took a break and walked a block I saw a huge church, overflowing with thousands of people, right in the midst of the city, but they were not white. They were all colored: Africans, migrants, refugees, poor. They were not counted in the evangelism strategy of the white. I believe, Christian mission is stuck with the old paradigm. We don't consider the poor or the colored as decent evangelism targets. Churches should open their eyes to the vast harvest in their communities. When we are mandated to evangelize, disciple and baptize people on earth (Matthew 28:19), we need to include people of all colors, residents and economic status.

## OVERSEAS WORKERS AS MISSIONARIES

I was part of the mission team that planted one of the first churches in Saigon (District 4) under the Alliance mission in Vietnam, it was difficult to evangelize the locals residing in urban cities. As a strategy, we aimed to reach out to the highlanders and indigenous peoples (tribes). But our mission team composed of Filipinos were able to plant the seed of the church through the help of Filipino expatriates living in Saigon. We slowly started our ministry among the poor in the city and it grew into hundreds. They are now worshipping in our planted church in Saigon.

The church in Tokyo (City Blessings Church, 299-0245 chiba ken

Sodegaura Shi Kuranamidai3 Chome shinsei Brothers kuranamidai BLDG.) planted by a friend also grew beginning with Filipino expatriates, mostly illegal migrant workers in Japan. I think the same thing happened in Hong Kong where a thriving Philippine church exists. There is also a growing Philippine church in the Middle East where lots of OFWs work.

It is already clear that many of these Filipino churches planted worldwide (Berlin, Jeddah, HK, Singapore, Tokyo, Ho Chi Minh, etc.) were started by Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs).

OFWs are a significant feature of Philippine mission. Assuming there are 12 million OFWs, then assuming 10% of these are born again (1.2 million), and assuming further that 10% of the born again OFWs are actively sharing the gospel, that would give us the largest Christian mission force in the world today, roughly 120,000!!! Not even the South Koreans

can swallow that. But we seldom consider them as missionaries. They are poor and didn't go to seminary. We have to remember that the first missionaries in the Bible were poor and uneducated. And like the OFWs they went out to mission not because of some profound realization about the need to expand the kingdom of God, but they left because of either famine or persecution or both.

Our OFWs left for not a very unsimilar reason, they left the Philippines because they were in need of jobs and their families are hungry. The number one problem in the Philippines is there are no jobs forcing millions every year to leave for work overseas as OFWs.

## THE OFW STRATEGY

When the first missionaries, the rag tag band of new Christians, went out, they did not go to the Greeks or the Romans or the Egyptians or whoever was in that foreign land. They always went to their relatives whom they found in the synagogues, their fellow Jews.

This is also the case with the OFWs. They did not evangelize the Japanese in Tokyo or the Arabs in Saudi or the Germans in Berlin or the Chinese in Hongkong. They shared the gospel to their fellow countrymen. When the synagogues were evangelized, soon, other nationalities also came and became part of the church. In Tokyo, when a Filipino woman became a Christian, she would bring her Japanese husband to church. That was how the church grew and took root. For more than twenty years I was discipling the educated and rich Filipinos on the same belief with the first American missionaries that if I reach the educated and rich Filipinos, they would in turn go to the masses and preach the gospel. But they did not. And worse, it took a very long time for them to respond to the call of Christ to go to mission, even to the upper class members of the society.

One day, our group decided to train and mobilize the urban poor Christians instead. That was how our mission started and that is the reason it has grown into a large organization today. The poor are easier and cheaper to mobilize, compared to the rich and educated Filipinos. Ninety Nine percent (99%) of the workers in CWTP today came from the slums. They don't need much adjustment to slum life because they grew up there.

## CHURCH PLANTING MISSION

Most experts (Wagner, Schwarz, Hybels, Peace, etc.) will say that the most effective form of evangelism is church planting. Studies have shown that it is better than the Navigator's bridge illustration and better than the Campus Crusade's Four Spiritual Laws. This is the challenge today in urban mission: how to plant churches in the slums. The first church grew quickly because the apostles planted churches.

The reason why we don't plant in places where there are already existing churches is because it is counter-productive. Most foreign missions in the Philippines do not realize this. Many of them, do not mind stepping on other churches, or even killing existing churches.

There was a time I had a thriving pre-school in our church in Payatas. It was really growing and the parents in the community paid tuition for their kids to enroll in our school. The school expanded from pre-school grades to Grade 6 over the years, until the Korean missionaries came. They set up their church and opened their own school beside us for free. Our school enrollment promptly dropped, and the church attendance as well.

Companion with the Poor will not just plant in a place where there is already a church. We won't go also where other churches might want to drop by and put up their own church. Thus, going to the worse slum was our only option. No one wants to go there but us. We don't stand a chance with the competition. We are very poor ourselves and when you see our church buildings, you will be discouraged. But if we are the only church there, people will have no choice but worship in our church.

Finding the ideal slum, where there is no church and which is very poor, is very difficult. At one time, it occupied my whole day. In looking for the area candidate we usually spend six months every year for slum communities that fit our standard for church planting. We would drive around, from one end of Metro Manila to the other end.

And we realized, there is no more Metro Manila in terms of territory. Antipolo, Taytay and Bacoor which are definitely not part of Metro Manila now form part of it in a very seamless way. No one notices that these areas are no longer part of Metro Manila. They became extensions of the district.

We used to work near the center of the Metropolis, like Tatalon or Balik-Balik, Sta. Mesa, Manila, where one can find railroad tracks. But as the metropolis grew and prospered, we were pushed farther and farther away from the center. When land gets too expensive because of developments (construction of malls or condominiums), the poor have to go farther away. Our slum churches are now found at the farthest edges of Metro Manila, as far away as Norzagaray (Matictic), Bulacan, Teresa, Calamba, Laguna and a couple of years ago, we began in Cebu. There are no slums in Davao City in Mindanao or Iloilo City in the Visayas or San Fernando in Pampanga, notwithstanding what people will say to the contrary. We have scouted these cities extensively and repeatedly.

Slums are always a function of too much money coming in too quickly. There are potential slum church projects along the coastal road up to Batangas because of the many economic zones that were opened there. This is southward. There is nothing like that happening in the north, along Bulacan, Pampanga

or Bataan because there are no significant economic activities there.

## MISSIONS AMONG THE SLUM DWELLERS

My eyes were opened one day when I read Dr Richard Peace's book titled Conversion, it was really his 25-year long dissertation at Fuller Seminary. He had done a scientific study of the work of the famous evangelist Billy Graham and came out with some astounding conclusions.

He had challenged Dr Graham directly saying his so-called converts were not joining churches at all in a significant way. Upset, Dr Graham undertook his own study, with more funding and came out with the same result.

Dr. Peace recommended that we stopped focusing on conversions involving a dramatic turn of life or behavior. We often focused on conversions like that of St Paul on the road to Damascus which accounts for only 20% of total conversions worldwide. 80% of true-blue blooded Christians today (including my wife) never had a dramatic conversion. Focusing on 20% is definitely a losing proposition.

I then made that the focus of my dissertation, how to train workers to plant churches in the slums. I was eventually invited to teach that program in Asian Theological Seminary (where I taught urban church planting for more than 12 years).

I have boasted to my students each semester that when they finish the semester, I guarantee that they can plant a church in 6 months. I have not lost my bet up to now. Our group continues to plant churches this way.

It all depends on the correct selection of the site. We use the following best parameters as we start our ministry among the slum-dwellers:

1. Find the poorest of the poor, no schools, no electricity, no water
2. Where there is no church, no Christians
3. Must not be an old slum community, less than 5 years old
4. Must have physical boundaries that allow for community relationships to grow
5. Must not be in places where the people can be summarily ejected, there is prospect for long term settlement
6. Squatter land, owned by the government or private sector, not owned by the poor occupants
7. Must not be less than 500 and not more than 1000 families
8. There is a land we can acquire on which we can build a church that can accommodate about one hundred worshippers

## CHURCH PLANTING MUST FOCUS ON THE 80%

Before CWTP begins church planting, first, it will do the initial demographic survey to find out if the community falls within the parameters we have set

above. We encourage churches or mission groups to follow this evidence-based approach in ministry also, to ensure they are really contributing to the expansion of the kingdom.

Most churches today have only pirated members from other churches. Studies also show that most mega churches do not plant churches.

I was in one of the biggest churches in America, Willow Creek community Church, one weekday. I was shocked with the boldness of Pastor Bill Hybells, her founder. If churches today would do what he did, we would solve half of our problems today. During the service, out of the blue, he began asking how many of those inside the church that night met Jesus for the first time, found Jesus in or through Willow Creek Community Church. Then he did the unimaginable, he asked them to stand up. I could only hold my breath. Then almost half of the church stood up! That is phenomenal.

For all his faults, Pastor Bill Hybells was a man of great wisdom and vision. I had been to that church more than once and each time I was there, I heard him taking time to explain the gospel carefully, and clearly. He may deserve to be removed from the church but he clearly was the reason Willowcreek grew to be what it is today.

### **SATURATION DRIVE STRATEGY**

I have observed that lately our evangelism no longer pressures people to make a decision on the spot. Those who come, are those who are called by God. When they are in church, we deem them members of the church already. And each Sunday we have an altar call. The 80% usually prays to receive Jesus more than once, some, twenty times. Up to now, my wife cannot say when exactly she was saved, what day, what month. And if you ask her today, she will pray to receive Jesus again.

After the demographic survey and we have collated and tabulated the results, we proceed to make the strategic plan for the two years we will be doing church planting in that selected community. Always as part of the strategic plan's evangelism activity, we include a saturation drive.

We make a map of all the houses in the slum community. If there are 1000 houses, we divide them systematically into the number of team members participating in the saturation drive. We then go to all the houses, knock on 1000 doors, to find the one called by God. We usually complete the drive in two days.

Of course, people will think we are crazy if we ask them, are you the one called by God? So we translated the questions to ones that can be measured, into negative questions that are designed to rule out those NOT CALLED by God:

1. Do you want to attend our Sunday church worship, we are born again, we are not Roman Catholics?

2. Do you want us to conduct a bible study once a week in your house?
3. Do you want to listen to a gospel presentation about how you can be saved in Jesus?

Those who say NO, will be ruled out as NOT CALLED by God. Almost all will say no. if we have chosen our slum community correctly though (no Christians and no church), we will usually get positive answers and in our experience, we always receive more than 20% Yes answers. After getting so many No answers, when we finally get a Yes answer, it usually brings tears to our eyes. It's always a very moving experience.

We mark on the map those who have said yes and we also prepare the Sunday service for their coming, which means we need to have enough chairs.

The most common approach in churches planting is to first form many small bible study groups. And then after one year, they gather all of the Bible Study groups to join the worship service, assuming now they are ripe for worship.

But CWTP starts our worship service immediately, even on the first Sunday that we are in the community. Cwtp holds small bible studies also to complement the Churchplanting. We form home bible studies HBS, which is one of the most effective evangelism tool alongside Churchplanting.

Our approach is founded on an assumption that in the Philippines, conversion can reach an average of 10%. The statistics of PCEC or Philippine Challenge (<https://www.philchal.org/growth-calculator>) supports this. It is very high and if we take advantage of it, at 10% 500 families can yield a minimum of 50 adults attending our church. But it also means we target communities which have never been reached by the gospel. If it is already saturated in some way, naturally the yield will be less than 10%.

I have seen some pastors make a terrible mistake not realizing this fact. For example, a church which is already more than twenty years old, has a revival among their youths and the pastor directs them to do evangelism with their fiery faith, to the adjoining streets by their church. The results would be disastrous as these nearby households are already very saturated. If the pastor instead tells them to go to a community which has never heard the gospel, the newly set ablaze youth would become even more encouraged when they see a bounty of harvest of souls in their evangelism.

### **THE GOSPEL MUST BE BROUGHT TO THE POOR**

Luke 4 strongly hints that the gospel should be brought to the poor as the primordial concern of the church. But the conventional definition of gospel or evangelism obviously does not suffice. It is not enough to share the gospel in other words especially if what we mean by the gospel is the narrow reductionist gospel we know of today.

The number one cause of poverty in the Philippines is graft and corruption (in government) according to World Bank (<https://cids.up.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Corruption-in-the-Philippines-vol.5-no.1-Jan-June-2001-2.pdf>). There are no other scientifically done study that correlates poverty with anything else except this World Bank study which correlates poverty with corruption.

I am also sure that the gospel did not mean to provide just a purely spiritual solution to the problem of the poor. In my dissertation, I have tried to show that the gospel was really good news to the poor and that the church was equally good news just as the gospel was. Throughout the gospel, there is hardly any mention of church. Jesus preached the gospel of the kingdom. In the book of acts, the kingdom began to fade to the background and the church came to center stage until the end of the New Testament.

**THE FIRST TO REJOICE IN THE COMING OF THE CHURCH WERE THE WOMEN.** They had been sidelined for centuries and when they had menstruation, they could not even come near to worship. With the advent of the church, women now could freely worship side by side with their husbands or the male members. This was liberating for the women and the gospel went around the world setting women free.

**THE SECOND TO REJOICE WERE THE SLAVES.** My professor loves to tell this story about Onesimus. He was a slave and had stolen from his master and was now a fugitive. Under Roman law, his master had the right to have him executed. He is on the run and after running more than 2,000 kilometers, he has arrived in Rome, terrified, exhausted and hungry. While sitting in the marketplace, catching his breath, he begins to hear a sermon. At the end, he becomes born again and approaches the preacher, who was no other than the apostle Paul.

Paul immediately recognizes his accent and ask if he is from a certain city and if he knows a certain Philemon. Of course, Onesimus becomes even more afraid. But Paul assures him and writes a letter, the famous epistle to Philemon. And he tells Onesimus to bring it to Philemon, his master. Onesimus carries the letter, in his sweat filled hand, 2,000 kilometers back to where he came from, unsure if doing so would not mean his certain death.

In the letter, we have the famous lines from Paul (in my own paraphrase): Dear Mr Philemon. I am sending to you Onesimus. I know he has stolen from you. Whatever he owes you, charge it to me. But remember you owe your very life to me. (Philemon was saved in Christ through Paul). But I am sending Onesimus back to you, not only as a slave but as a brother also. We all know the ending. But what we often fail to imagine is this, that now, master and slave stand side by side as equals on Sunday during worship. This is the good news of the gospel and one brought about by

the advent of the church.

### **WHO ARE THE POOR?**

The poor in the Bible is not always defined in a straightforward way. I think the best way to define poor or who are the poor is by the process of association. The poor is often written together or side by side words like meek, orphans, widows, sick, oppressed, etc. These associated words add meaning to the word poor.

God had his favorite expression: *almána ger yatom* or orphans, widows and strangers. All throughout the Old Testament, God used this phrase, either to praise the Israelites when they did right (you have taken cared of the orphans, widows and strangers) or else, to castigate them for having neglected or abandoned the orphans, widows and aliens.

### ***Almána ger yatom was God's Plumblines and our First Definition of Poor.***

When Jesus came, he introduced three more plumblines, three more trios. *The first were the despised poor: prostitutes, tax collectors and sinners. The second were the invisible poor: prisoners, lepers and gentiles. The third were the outcaste poor: beggars, those with defects and the sick.* All these constitute what the bible refers to as the poor (including *almána ger yatom*).

All these drew near to Jesus, were drawn to him and He welcomed them.

In my wildest dream, I always think of a church mobbed by sinners just the way they mobbed Jesus. Today, the church repels sinners. But I imagine a church filled with crooks, homosexuals, prostitutes, corrupt politicians.

CWTP today has five full-pledged gay church planters. Someday, we will also have staff who are former prostitutes.

Sinners in the gospels had a unique meaning, it was a derogatory label for a specific group of despised individuals. It was not a generic term (as in, all have sinned, all are sinners). It is similar to our label for some unsavory people in our culture (drunkards, womanizers, drug addicts, etc.; in America, it might refer to "niggers"...just think of any label difficult for you to pronounce).

The invisible poor are people the Jews did not want to see in public. They had to go into hiding. Prisoners literally disappeared once they were in jail. This is emphasized in the teachings of Jesus who one time said, you visited me when you visited the prisoners (Matt.25:36,40), when talking about the sheep and the goats.

Aliens or foreigners or Gentiles have an interesting implication today. They would be the hated illegal immigrants that President Trump wanted so badly to eliminate in the USA. I have many relatives in America who were at one time or still now are, illegal aliens. God is the god of migrants or illegal aliens. The white Americans were once aliens in America too.

God has a rebuke for the Israelites which he repeated

so many times in the Old Testament: do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, seeing you were also once aliens yourselves (Ex 22:21; 23:9; Lev 19:33; Deut 10:19; 24:17, etc.). it is repeated so many times, it gives one a headache. The greatest rebuke though is when Jesus said, the prostitutes and tax collectors will go to heaven ahead of the decent Jews. (Mark 2:17; Luke 19:9) The gospel always turns our world upside down.

## GOSPEL, KINGDOM AND CHURCH

There are three concepts that are deeply intertwined with each other: gospel, kingdom and church. Without one, the two others are meaningless. You cannot define church without the gospel or kingdom, you cannot define the gospel without the church and the kingdom, and you cannot define the kingdom without the church or the gospel.

Church means worship, community and mission. The mission of the church is to preach the gospel. The church is composed of believers living together and living out the kingdom, and also points to the kingdom. Through the church, the world sees the kingdom, the church is not the kingdom, it just points to the kingdom.

We see the centrality of the church in the plan of redemption in the words of the Apostle Paul:

*I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.*

- Ephesians 3;7-13

This paragraph above lays down the ground work for us to fully and faithfully define what the gospel is.

The reductionist gospel says we are saved to Jesus, period. Our preachers tell us, now that you are saved, go your way and leave me alone. This bizarre gospel came out of the highly secular (reductionist), materialistic and individualistic American gospel.

The true gospel says we are saved to Jesus and also to the body. The body is not optional. In fact, it is by making a community life mandatory that the gospel becomes truly good news to the poor.

God is saying in the gospel, "Hey world, look at my church, look at how they love one another, how they forgive each other 500 times, how they carry one

another's burden. See how I have blessed them and there is no poor among them. Are you not envious? Don't you want to become part of my people also? If you do, you can come through my son, Jesus Christ." This is the gospel that is good news to the poor.

It is an invitation to become part of the community of God's people, believers living together, and living out the kingdom. The door or entry way for the unsaved is Christ Jesus, the way the truth and the light, the door, the lamb of God.

## THE CHURCH AS COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS

Today, the church has no sense of community. After the worship service, we go home and we don't remember who was seated beside us during the worship service. And during the week, that person may have died and we will never know.

Community life is not just living together. Paul gave the political implications of our life together. He said, now, in the church, there is no more male, female, Jew, gentile, rich, poor, black, white, slave, or free. And he gave its economic implications. All shared their possessions so that there was no poor in their midst. Because he who gathered much did not have too much and he who gathered little did not lack anything.

Jesus also created its boundaries. "Who is my mother, who is my brother, who is my sister? But he who does the will of the father." All the members of the church community are believers. There are no unbelievers. All are in pursuit of one thing, to do the will of the father. There must be an Olympiad inside the church as each member competes with one other to do the will of the Father. It is also through this Olympiad that the reality of Christ inside the church becomes concrete.

The gospel is an invitation to a relationship, to a wedding feast, to the Body. It is not just a bunch of propositions to which we give our intellectual assent. The invitation is to a life together.

This was how it all started. God called one man, Abraham. And he made a covenant with him, to build from him a nation, a people so numerous no one could count them, a community with rules different from that of the world. He began a contest. He would show to the world that his system, his kingdom, his people would be better.

God was going to show off. Moses said,

*See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as*

*this body of laws I am setting before you today?*  
- Deuteronomy 4:5-8

Without this contest, there is no urgency in the gospel. The contest comes about because of a community in which God can show off to the world. And the contest is between two paradigms, two ways of life, demonstrated in two communities, the people of God living out the kingdom and the people of Satan living out the ways of the world.

Without community there is no contest. Without community, the gospel becomes bad news to the poor. Individualism means there is no gospel. It also means the poor Christians are left on their own.

## THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

The church today is very worldly. It has become very materialistic, very individualistic, and very secular. There is no community to speak of, no family of God to invite people to. Its every man for himself.

Also, individualistic people cannot plant churches. The church they plant won't be able to form communities.

In CWTP, it is necessary that our church planters be part of a community before they can go out to plant churches in the slums. Otherwise, their individualism will only further fuel the deterioration of the gospel.

This has been the greatest challenge for CWTP. How do we form such a community, what models can we use? Throughout history, most Christian communities are composed of only one gender, all men, all priests or all monks or all nuns, all women. CWTP has single men and women and also married staff and many with children. There are some models with heterogenous memberships, who have families like the Mennonites. Most of them however are separatists, withdrawn from society. But our calling is to be salt and light and it means we are dumped right in the midst of worldliness.

Cwtp is developing our own model, approximating as much as we can, the community described in the bible.

John Driver, a Mennonite, professor of New Testament, working among prostitutes in South America, and constantly in dialogue with liberation theologians, has written a helpful book, *Images of Church in Mission*. In the book he says, the Bible does not have a definition of church but it has hundreds of images of church. CWTP is using these images to slowly form our vision of what a biblical community looks like.

At the beginning, we gave each one a vote. We empowered our members. They are not staff or employees, but family. After some time, we noticed that the spouses also needed one vote each.

Someday, when our children are old enough, and bothers to join the election, they too will have one vote each. This is the cornerstone of our community building, making our more than one hundred

members, be owners and stakeholders of CWTP. They elect our board and officer's and take part in financial decision making.

Secondly, we are building corporate values that we hope will work towards making it easier for all our members to be more open to sharing their possessions based on what the book of Deuteronomy 15 says, ie there shall be no poor among us.

The movement towards community life begins with those who are rich and powerful. Community begins with them, not with those who are poor and weak. The former must reach out, must begin the process of sharing generously. Our model is Christ Jesus, who though He was rich, became poor, in order to make others rich.

For everyone, we all try to follow what is written in Acts: it is more blessed to give than to receive. This redefines wealth. For us wealth is not measured in terms of how much we possess but in how much we have given away.

## IT IS A LONG JOURNEY FOR CWTP

Martin Luther wrote about the hiddenness of the church. All those images of the church pointed out by John Driver are, the church as family, the church as an army, the church as salt and light, etc. all these are hidden. They are hidden in mysterious ways. The church is here but it is not.

I have been in many church conflicts, usually as a lawyer for one side. I know that the church today is ridden with divisions and strife, lustful and carnal, materialistic and vain. In the last two years, during the pandemic, I have read about many Christian leaders, world renowned leaders, who have fallen or been found out in their sins, some were exposed only after their death.

In a way, the church today is hidden under a ton of filth. CWTP knows this for a fact. We struggle painfully with it. But it is only through this painful struggle that we can see the true church emerging.

We know that the second generation, our children and even our children's children, will not always be on God's side, will not be born again and will thus pose a big weakness within the community. This is the fate of many Christian communities which started out well and then died one or two generations after when the new generation that took over, who no longer knew Jesus.

Holding properties make the risk even greater. Most churches fight over money and properties. We want to relinquish all properties but we cannot. Instead, we hold them all with an open palm.

Part of the training of the staff before they can become a member of CWTP is to immerse in the slums. They sleep there for three days and two nights. They don't bring any money or food. They are totally at the mercy of their hosts, whoever that may be. We tell them only one thing: to find out what they can live without. Can they live without their toothbrush, their beds, their

daily baths, their cellphone, etc.

The goal is not to make them self-denying ascetic monks but to help them find their freedom. St Paul said, I know how to live in opulence and I know how to live in destitution. We cannot solve our lust by rejecting all luxuries (one day, what we suppress will just burst out and make us implode). Sin can only be solved by finding our freedom. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.

When John of the cross encouraged us to live the austere life of *nada nada nada* (three nadas), he was not emphasizing a life of abstinence. He was referring to a life full of Jesus. He was encouraging us to have nothing but Jesus. Desire only Jesus.

### THE CHURCH'S ENEMY

Materialism makes individualism necessary. Our view of material possession, that we are owners instead of stewards, makes community almost impossible. Secularism or its smaller version, reductionism, justifies this way of life: we don't have to share, its every man for himself.

Historically, the greatest enemy of the church has always been a spiritual virus. It enters the church so Christians have to leave the church, they never know who the real enemy is. Worldliness is the enemy. It is a virus that has entered the church and mutated the gospel.

The real work of the church today is to learn how to combat this worldliness, the virus inside.

Paul said, we are not to be conformed to the world. But before we can fight it, we have to be able to identify it. We have to know how worldliness operates. Worldliness is materialism, individualism and secularism. They are now integrated into the gospel we preach today.

So, at CWTP we want to fight materialism by going to the urban poor, going down instead of going up. CWTP is on a downward mobility, towards the slums and squatter areas. We form them into communities that share the love and grace of God that they may gain salvation, a community that is now part of the cosmic contest.



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