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A Model for Mission in a Pacific Island Urban Context

Introduction

The evangelization of the largest non-western city in the Pacific islands, Port Moresby, capital of the independent nation of Papua New Guinea (PNG), has in the past often focused on large scale public evangelism campaigns. While not discounting the place of public evangelism in reaching the more than 800 people groups potentially represented in this largest Melanesian city, this paper posits an alternative incarnational approach grounded on a lay-based mission model.

Port Moresby's Urban Context

Port Moresby is a microcosm of Papua New Guinea. It has attracted people from a diversity of the tribes and people groups across PNG, many of whom came to the capital as economic migrants seeking employment, but ended up eking out an existence as economic refugees when their dreams did not materialize. Other Pacific island peoples work and live in Port Moresby, as do a wide cross section of expatriate workers attracted by lucrative job opportunities in the resource industries associated with mining, forestry, and fisheries.

Port Moresby is a small city by world standards, with an (under) estimated population in 2011 of 343,000 (*CIA World Factbook* 2014). As the nation's capital and as the largest city in the region, people are also drawn into its ambit to benefit from its spectrum of government services in areas such as health and education. It has been estimated that 12.5% of the population lives in the cities of PNG and that the annual rate of urbanization is 2.73%, taking into account all urban centers across the nation (*CIA World Factbook* 2014).

It is vital to understand a little of the history of the modern city of Port Moresby, as this is the arena for Adventist urban mission in this non-western Melanesian city (for a more comprehensive history see Oram 1967, 1970, 1976; Langmore and Oram 1970; Latukefu 1989). When the colonists arrived on the shores of PNG in 1873, ten villages of the Motu people were scattered across the current Port Moresby area (Inglis and Oram 1974:5). From a colonial outpost, Port Moresby was propelled into the modern era during World War II as a strategic military center in Australia's defense. As the country's capital city it continued to develop as PNG gained independence from Australia in 1975, and resource industries, including mining, became major sources of income. It has become a center for "global modernity and global connections—local and transnational commerce, tourism, and media/telecommunications—and local government administration." (Lockwood 2004:25).

The transition from a colonial expatriate town to a modern multicultural city has not come without difficulties. The influx of migrants from the various ethnic tribal groups contributed to social issues such as an increase in poverty, vagrancy, crime and gangs, mushrooming squatter settlements, together with the "disintegration of traditional norms and constraints that [once] held society together in familiar ways" (Butler 1994:157; see also Chao 1984; Goddard 2005, 2010, 2013b; van der Werf 2008:60-63). Similarly, the prolific church growth writer Donald McGavran, reflecting on his Indian missionary experience spoke of "urban conglomerates"—multiethnic groups who were involved in a "rush to the cities" (1979:157), while more recent studies have focused on the effect of urbanization on Christians, such as Wenxi Zhang's study of urban Chinese Christians (Zhang 2013). It is vital that the church recognizes that "cities have always been the repositories not only for people's strongest hopes, but also for their deepest fears. Because of their size and complexity, cities can overwhelm individuals. It is easy to get lost and to wander into areas that frighten and confuse" (Pahl 2003:249). Such a context provides fertile ground for mission in reaching out to the needs of people caught in the midst of massive social change, as is the case in the city of Port Moresby.

City life has instituted a "shift from traditional identities derived from kinship, occupational and gender positions to ones frequently constituted . . . through . . . subjectively focused forms of self expression—including those centred on consumption and other displays of personal taste" (Gewertz and Errington 2004:278). However, as Gewertz and Errington note, "despite continuing personal and social transformations, local ethnic commitments remain highly significant to many Papua New Guineans" (281). This is illustrated in the construction of the road linking the rural area of Rigo with Port Moresby. It was built with one of its original aims

to facilitate agricultural development and subsequent commercial profit. However, the new road had the unforeseen effect of facilitating the fulfillment of mutual kinship obligations between city dwellers and villagers as goods were now more easily able to be exchanged using the new highway (Ward 1970; see also Trompf 1991:65; 1994:114).

The Rigo road case study may seem insignificant, but it is an indicator of the high value of kinship relationships in PNG, often referred to as the *wantok* system. The extended family, kinship, community, and interpersonal relationships are of prime value across PNG (Shaw 1976, 1995:129). They are in effect a social security system that can be relied on in an environment that is currently unable to offer government social security. The kinship loyalties and highly valued interpersonal relationships are useful conduits along which the message of the gospel in an Adventist context can be conveyed in ways reminiscent of New Testament times, for example, when Andrew brought his brother Peter to Jesus (John 1:41-42).

Overview of NT Urban Mission

When we think of evangelism in the early church, our minds are drawn to the sermons by Stephen, Peter, and Paul. However, these impromptu sermons were not so much evangelistic sermons as such but are more correctly designated as personal testimonies of their conversion and their witness to Jesus' power in their lives. Their testimonies were often delivered in times of personal danger or inconvenience and were certainly not previously prepared for delivery. However, their effect was potentially life-changing, as evinced in King Agrippa's response to Paul (Acts 26:27-28). We are reminded that "when we think of evangelistic methods today, preaching in a church building or perhaps a great arena comes readily to mind. We must, of course, rid ourselves of all such preoccupations when thinking of evangelism by the early Christians" (Green 1984:234, 2004:300).

While the New Testament records the public testimony of its prominent leaders, it also records that the early Christian's message spread through kinship relationships, for example, the Roman centurion Cornelius, together with his relatives and close friends, became Christians (Acts 10); Lydia and her family were baptized (Acts 16:14-15); the Philippian jailer and his family were converted and baptized (Acts 16:33). Christianity spread through natural home and family networks (Green 2004:24), not generally by formal preaching but by:

The informal chattering to friends and chance acquaintances, in homes and wine shops, on walks, and around market stalls. They went everywhere gossiping the gospel; they did it naturally, enthusiastically, and with the conviction of those who are not paid to say that sort of thing.

Consequently, they were taken seriously, and the movement spread, notably among the lower classes. (Green 1984:208-209)

Early Christians met together to worship in their homes in what are termed today as “house churches” (see Banks 1980; Banks 1994; Banks and Banks 1998; Green 1984:263-269). Their witness spawned a multiplication of conversions—a church planting movement—which proved to be a most effective evangelization methodology (Green 2004:24) that is still considered effective and practiced widely today (Zdero 2004, 2007).

Sharing the gospel was not primarily the province of professional orators or preachers. The gospel was spread by word of mouth among ordinary people during the course of their daily activities and lives. “Christianity was supremely a lay movement, spread by informal missionaries” (Harnack 1972:313; Green 1984:332, 2004:380; Hiebert and Meneses 1995:346). Origen writing in the third century recorded that “the Christian faith, in fact, was spread by the illiterate, women, workers of leather and wool and such common people” and by “workers in wool and leather, laundry workers and the most illiterate and bucolic yokels (Origen, *Contra Celsum* III, 49-55, cited in Kavunkal 2014:69; Green 1984:209, 2004:243).

Urban Mission and Adventist Attitudes

Adventists have had ambivalent attitudes towards the city (see, e.g., Wilson 1980; Oosterwal 1980). It is not the purpose of this paper to enter into that debate, except to provide a brief background for this study. Veteran Adventist missiologist Gottfried Oosterwal summarizes the situation nicely: “As in Scripture, she [Ellen White] warns us of the dangers of the city, calling believers away from these places of evil. But when she speaks of the city in the light of God’s compassion, she urges the believers to pray for the prosperity of the city and to live and work there for its redemption” (1980:21, 1993). Elsewhere Oosterwal called for “new Adventist lifestyles in technopolis” and “greater involvement in the secular affairs and interests of society” in an incarnational manner, in order to reach out to the ever-increasing urban populations of the world (1987:60, 1989).

Similarly Ellen White invited “families who know the present truth [to] settle in these cities and villages, to set up there the standard of Christ” (1947:180; 1911:158), despite other statements to the contrary, for example, in the compilation *Country Living* (White 1946). Subsequent Adventist missiologists and researchers have also written on urban mission and evangelization (Moyer 1999; Sahlin 2007) while more recently, urban mission has been the focus of the Adventist Church’s concerted outreach, with whole issues of the *Elders Digest* and *Ministry* magazines devoted to the topic (Mission to the Cities: Hope for Large Urban Centers 2013; Mission to the Cities 2013).

Adventist Urban Mission in Port Moresby

PNG considers itself a Christian country, with Christianity enshrined within its constitution. Most citizens identify with one of the numerous Christian denominations or missions, while ten percent of the country's population consider themselves Seventh-day Adventist. The denominations are widely represented across Port Moresby, with Adventists meeting in sixty churches ranging from squatter settlement and "grass roots" churches to sophisticated urban buildings (Adventist Review Staff 2012:8).

In the recent past, the evangelization of Port Moresby has featured large scale public evangelism campaigns. These have been a most effective church growth methodology (for example, see Zachary 1995:19), with more recent programs conducted by Dwight Nelson (via downlink), Mark Finley, and John Carter (Coombe 1998:6; Manners and Stacey 1998:11; Adventist News Network 2001:19-20; Williams and Morton 2001:18-19; Adventist Review Staff 2012:8-9; Kingston, The Carter Report, and Opis 2012:3), while PNG indigenous evangelists have not generally received similar high profile press coverage. Huge unsubstantiated claims have been made regarding attendance figures, some of which were clearly not correct, verging into what could be termed "evang-elastic" statistics! A major concern for church administrators and pastors has been effective follow-up and nurture of the thousands of new converts (Kingston, The Carter Report, and Opis 2012:3).

As mentioned previously, while not discounting the place of public evangelism in reaching the more than 800 people groups potentially represented in this largest Melanesian city, it is the role of missiology to provide, at the least, some form of commentary and analysis on the practice of mission. These campaigns have been noted in the anthropological literature. Ira Bashkow, writing in the journal *Ethnohistory*, noted:

At a "Next Millennium Seminar" recently held [in 1998] by the Seventh-Day Adventist Church [sic], a major focus of attention in Papua New Guinea was the installation of satellite downlink equipment to relay "a series of inspirational and prophetic lectures" in simultaneous translation from a church in Michigan to five thousand sites around the world, including several in Papua New Guinea. (Bashkow 2000:156)

Nancy Sullivan, an American resident anthropologist in Madang, PNG, recorded in *Contemporary PNG Studies: The Divine Word University Research Journal* that

when 2300 people in Port Moresby were baptised during the Seventh Day Adventist [sic] crusade of Mark Finley in 2001, they were supported by a national government grant of K100,000 so that certain provinces could buy satellite equipment and receive the EMTV broadcast of the event (National 31 May 2001, 6). Minister for Lands, John Pundari [a Seventh-day Adventist church member], took the opportunity to welcome the crusade and declare that PNG would be richly blessed by God's abundant grace (Post-Courier 5 July 2001, 5). A week later, Brother Andrew Simpson, now of Divine Word University, wrote a letter to the Post-Courier describing how the 'crusade opened with the special commendation from the Prime Minister [and soon] turned into 'Catholic bashing' by the presenters.' (Post-Courier 18 July 2001, 10) (Sullivan 2007:72)

Early Adventist mission work in PNG did not appear to feature mass public evangelistic campaigns as Adventist mission at the time focused on village level outreach (Wicks 1925:3). Public evangelism is also not evident in Adventist writing on the history of Adventist mission in the South Pacific (Dixon 1985:198-233; Fletcher 1985:34-57; Ferch 1986, 1991). A shift in outreach strategy occurred in the 1970s and 1980s with the appointment of young Adventist pastors to Port Moresby as evangelists (Oliver 1997:131-195). This shift in outreach approach may have been in response to the increasing urbanization occurring in Port Moresby or a reflection of the Australian Adventist approach to outreach at the time. Nevertheless public evangelism has continued as a "prominent evangelistic method used by PNG [and visiting] Adventist pastor-evangelists, becoming institutionalized in the life of the PNG Adventist Church" (Humble 2012:5).

Urban Mission: Now and Into the Future

The Adventist Church in Port Moresby is a strong entity with at least sixty congregations spread across the city. Church members and pastors are engaged in a multitude of ministries that range from social involvement such as ministry to prisoners, literacy training, welfare assistance to resident scavengers at the Baruni dump waste facility, to more overtly evangelistic activities such as Bible studies, Revelation Seminars, street and market preaching and public evangelistic campaigns. Many church members are active in sharing their faith, but there is also a tendency to professionalize faith-sharing by reliance on big programs. The church also needs to beware of the institutionalization of care to the disadvantaged. By devolving the responsibility to ADRA or Community Services and sheltering under an institutional umbrella, ordinary church members are deprived of the responsibility and opportunity of personal commitment and involvement in caring, and of sharing their faith.

With their strong cultural values of kinship and extended family loyalties, Adventist church members in Port Moresby should be encouraged to purposefully engage kinship relationships and their work associate networks (sometimes referred to as *wanwoks*—literally “one work”) in an incarnational way of sharing their faith during the normal course of their daily activities (Colon 2012; Hiebert and Meneses 1995). Doug McConnell’s dissertation (1990) corroborated the value of similar networking among evangelical ministers in Port Moresby which led to cooperative strategies in urban mission. Research conducted by the United Church in PNG found that “evangelism in Melanesia is seen to be most appropriate when it is set within a context of close relationships, especially in communities, groups, families and personal friendships” (Vincent 1992:72). Because Christianity is focused on a relationship with Jesus Christ, Melanesians have a key advantage in sharing their faith, as their social existence is dependent on good relationships. This is a key difference between mass public evangelism which often calls for individual decisions regardless of family contexts and is generally focused on quantitative results, in contradistinction to kinship relational outreach that spreads through community networks and is more concerned with qualitative interpersonal relationships.

In reaching out to their *wantoks* (same language and ethnic groups), the churches could implement McGavran’s homogeneous unit principle of evangelism as an evangelistic strategy (1980:198). The homogenous unit principle proposed that it should not be mandatory for people to cross either racial, linguistic, or class barriers in order to hear the gospel. As an evangelistic strategy, it can be very effective in reaching people of similar ethnicity and language. However, the churches should be made aware of its weaknesses as an operator for regular congregational life. Its critics have rightfully pointed out that it can lead to exclusivity and ethnocentrism within the church, which are anathema to the gospel (Padilla 1982:29; Stott 1995:50).

Furthermore, lay members need not wait for church designated evangelistic campaigns. Green reminds us that “the very disciples themselves were, significantly, laymen, devoid of theological or rhetorical training. Christianity was from its inception a lay movement” (1984:208). Similarly, Adventist missiologist Gottfried Oosterwal, in his landmark work *Mission Possible*, reminded the Adventist Church in the 1970s that the role of mission should be the domain of the laity (1972, 1973, 1975). The Church is still yet to fully engage with his insights and suggestions. Although a lay-driven church planting movement, supported and initiated by church leaders, spread through the PNG highlands and other areas of PNG in the 1980s (Humble 2005; Robertson n.d., 1987, 1990, 1995), such movements

have not been sustained, and appeared to peter out towards the end of the administrative quinquennium at the approach of the next General Conference session.

In order to resuscitate renewed commitment to lay-driven lifestyle evangelism, the church must recognize that “one size does not fit all when it comes to bringing people to Jesus Christ. There must be careful understanding of culture, beliefs, and worldview to allow the Word of God to root out the old and create a new set of beliefs and values” (Bauer 2007:253). While it sounds redundant, it cannot be overstressed that a dynamic relationship with Jesus Christ is foundational to effective faith sharing. Green remarked that “people will not believe that Christians have good news to share until they find that the bishops and bakers, university professors and housewives, bus drivers and street corner preachers are all alike keen to pass it on, however different their methods may be” (Green 1984:333, 2004:381).

The dependence on large-scale campaigns and professional speakers has to some degree disenfranchised the laity from involvement in outreach and vaccinated or inoculated a proportion of them against evangelism. In order to counteract this effect, a proactive approach should be engaged to equip church members for ministry, thus assisting them in recovering from a dependence on religious professionals. This may involve the establishment of lay training schools similar to those run in the highlands of PNG, but adapted to the urban context of Port Moresby so that its church members’ concomitant employment and educational commitments are taken into consideration (see Robertson n.d., 1987, 1990, 1995).

Urban mission in Port Moresby will also focus on an incarnational approach to mission—“treading urban ground like Jesus” (Krause 2013:6). In many instances the church has relied on a centripetal approach to mission—calling the people to come to a church or central venue to be involved in a program. However, as Jesus’ ministry is analyzed, the rhetorical question could be asked, “Did Jesus have a church or a central mission station to which he called people?”

On the other hand, an incarnational approach to mission acts centrifugally, whereby Christians go to the people and minister to them as salt and light within their local context (Matacio 2008). Of necessity, this will involve ministries of compassion in working with the urban poor, many of whom have been reduced to poverty through unemployment by their transition from a self-sustaining rural environment to a cash-oriented urban society (Hiebert and Meneses 1995:354-357). Ellen White’s classic mission statement on incarnational mission is oft quoted but unfortunately seldom fully implemented: “Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired

their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, "Follow Me" (White 1909:143). Incarnational mission involves intentional socializing with people, empathizing with their concerns, ministering to their real needs (not those that we imagine are their needs) and thus, gaining the trust of the people. It is only after trust relationships have been formed that there is a basis for a call to discipleship.

Ironically, while missiology has been domesticated in the language of missional churches (Roxborough 2014:120), the churches in the "mission field" need to adapt their mission to their urban context by a more missional approach. The church should be encouraged to develop a Melanesian missional theology of urban cultural engagement (Leong 2012). In so doing, it will exegete its context and develop a theology appropriate to its particular context. Paul Hiebert's model of critical contextualization could be a useful tool for exegeting both the church's urban cultural context and Scripture that is relevant to that urban context (Hiebert 1984, 1987, 2010).

While church members have ready access to their kinship networks and work associates, they do not generally have access to the elite of Port Moresby. The elite, whether indigenous or expatriate, live in houses surrounded by tall fences, razor ribbon, and a high degree of security. Door to door visitation is nigh impossible in such circumstances and will invariably be met by snarling guard dogs and rejection by security officers. Alternative outreach measures are called for.

How can the gospel within an Adventist Melanesian context penetrate the homes of the elite, many of whom have been brought, through their employment, to an ostensibly Christian country? While Hope Channel and 3ABN television programs penetrate these homes via satellite, recent Adventist evangelistic programs relayed on the national Kundu TV station have resulted in a vigorous international Facebook discussion that condemned perceived religious intolerance and "Catholic bashing." Such an approach will only antagonize non-believers, including the elite.

I believe that the biblical examples of Naaman's wife's unknown (nameless) maidservant (2 Kgs 5), and the experience of Daniel and his three friends in Nebuchadnezzar's court (Dan 1), hold the key to reaching the elite inhabitants within Port Moresby. Each of these individuals, as servants, had direct access to the rulers of the day. What is the parallel in Port Moresby? Domestic helpers, known as *haus meris* (literally house women) enter the houses and compounds of the elite every day, providing house cleaning, child minding, cooking, and other domestic services. Some of them live on the same compound as their employers, in smaller *hausboi* houses (literally "boy houses"), originally constructed for domestic servants (Goddard 2005:5). Similarly in the early church, "the slaves

and freedmen ... provide[d] a way of penetrating even into the great families of the Roman aristocracy" (Green 1984:255).

I suggest that in order to strategically reach the elite of Port Moresby, that the church establish a *haus meri* club for training Adventist domestics how to understand and share their faith, as well as provide training in how to become better at their provision of services. Similar training could be provided for Adventist security personnel, gardeners (often referred to as "garden boys") and "tea boys" who provide cleaning services and serve morning and afternoon tea in business houses and throughout the government public service offices. By equipping ordinary faithful church members for service, they can minister in an incarnational way in the familiar context of their employer's family home or work environment.

Conclusion

As the Adventist Church in Port Moresby looks to future evangelization in its urban context, it may rightly choose to retain mass public evangelism as a significant method in reaching people. Melanesians are an event-focused people who love to gather together in community for celebrations, programs, and events of all types. However, the nature of the urban context at such large scale events is not generally based on mutual community relationships and natural networks, but rather favors an individualistic approach to mission. These contextual factors need to be seriously considered and the programs adjusted to incorporate these significant cultural insights.

This paper, on the other hand, has suggested a powerful biblical model for mission that is generally not well implemented and often ignored. An incarnational approach to mission cannot be program focused; it is of essence a person-focused approach to mission, initially focusing on the development of a trust bond between the layperson and a person in the community. Its ultimate goal, however, is the transfer of that trust relationship to Jesus.

The nature of the cultures of the Melanesian people of Port Moresby lend themselves well to such an incarnational model of mission, in that kin and extended family relationships provide natural pre-existing trust bonds through which gospel communication from an Adventist perspective can flow. Because incarnational mission has not been a significant intentional mode of evangelization, its implementation will require strategic thought and training both at the personal and organizational levels of the church. It is my hope that incarnational ministry by ordinary church members will regain the prominence and success of making disciples for Christ, as it once did in the early church.

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