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From Rural to Urban: Critical Differentiations in Ministry Contexts within Rural and Urban Environments

Introduction

As a young schoolboy, I used to wonder what challenges were left for humanity. From 1577-1580, Sir Francis Drake circumnavigated the globe. In 1953, Crick and Watson discovered the double-helix structure of the DNA molecule, and Hilary and Tenzing conquered Mt. Everest. In 1969, Armstrong, Aldrin, and Collins made it to the moon. Yet, with every passing school year, I learned of the many challenges remaining for humanity. There were physical mountains that still needed to be conquered: the tens of millions who live in garbage dumps; the tens of millions of street children who roam our cities by night and day; the hundreds of millions of orphans yearning for a loving home; the millions of children who die yearly from vaccine-preventable diseases; and the tens of thousands who die daily from dirty drinking water. The list could go on. Yes, Mt. Everest may have been conquered in 1953, but many mountains still remain unconquered before humanity.

Perhaps the largest mountains facing humanity are not physical—they are spiritual. The rapid urbanization of the early 21st century is not merely a subject for intellectual discussion and debate. From a missiological perspective, the fusion of urbanization, globalization, and secularization combine to present an entire mountain range of spiritual peaks that call for our sustained prayers and renewed focus as missiologists and missionaries.

In my role as President of Adventist Frontier Missions, Inc. (AFM, see www.afmonline.org), I am confronted daily by the need for AFM to provide focused training and meaningful counsel for front-line missionary

teams serving in urban environments. While AFM's early projects focused on ethnically homogenous and static people groups in often clearly defined geographical locations, current projects increasingly focus on ministry in large urban environments characterized by population fluidity and religious, ethnic, socio-economic, and cultural diversity.

This article seeks to delineate three critical dimensions of ministry that impact ministry strategies in predominantly rural and in predominantly urban contexts for AFM Front Line Workers (FLWs). First, the community contexts within rural and urban environments. Second, the ministry strategy considerations for FLWs in rural and urban environments. Third, personal factors impacting FLWs in rural and in urban environments. The article provides in summary form the three key critical dimensions of ministry that are shared with AFM FLWs during initial training and that are utilized post-launch by AFM FLWs with their supervisors when prayerfully demonstrating urban ministry strategies within their unique urban contexts. The article will not provide an exhaustive analysis of each of these critical dimensions of ministry, but will provide a conceptual framework that FLWs can and do utilize when prayerfully reflecting on mission strategies on the ground.

Critical Community Contexts within Rural and Urban Environments

In terms of local community cultures in predominantly rural contexts (PRC) AFM's history indicates that the more rural and isolated the community, the higher the context (Hall 1976) and the more homogenous the culture, religious practices, and beliefs tend to be. In predominantly urban contexts (PUC) however, the more urbanized the community, the lower the context the community tends to be (Hall 1989) and the greater the diversity in culture and religious practices and beliefs (religious pluralism). Furthermore, the greater the impact of post-modernity, the greater the sense of alienation from God, the betrayal from broken trust, the personal insecurity due to a lack of a healing community, the lack of personal identity, and the sense of being unwanted, overlooked, and unneeded by society as a whole (Bauer 2017:74).

PRC environments tend to be relatively socially stable but are often economically tenuous. Economically active youth and adults may commute daily or for extended periods to urban areas for employment. In PUC environments however, there tend to be multiple socio-economic classes. There are often significant and stable socio-economic strata, yet there may also be significant fluid population groups, for example, migrants, immigrants, new arrivals in the urban environment, illegal aliens, people

fleeing persecution, and people trying to "disappear." Members of fluid communities often experience social fragmentation combined with a loss of connections from their past values, faith, and underlying worldview. Many youth and other rural migrants immigrate to urban areas seeking economic and educational opportunities and to redefine themselves by leaving behind traditional religions and cultures for the modern, more democratic, technologically advanced, consumer-driven, and contemporary urban cultures.

PRC communities are often comprised of self-contained household units with land and animals. Many such communities have a tenuous hold on their land since some corporations demonstrate a willingness and ability to acquire land for private commercial exploitation by simply ignoring or overriding, through dubious legal means, the ancestral domain framework within which the PRC communities operate. PUC communities however tend to show a greater diversity of accommodation standards and provision. Other than for the upper socio-economic groups and the relative affluence and opportunity of gated communities, urban areas are increasingly characterized by high population densities. Poor urban inhabitants increasingly live in densely packed, potentially high-crime neighborhoods, with limited educational or recreational opportunities, polluted environments, inadequate transport infrastructure, poor sanitation, increased levels of poverty, and economic desperation.

At the worldview level, the more rural and isolated a community is, the more homogenous the underlying worldview tends to be within the community. This is in sharp contradistinction to what is found in PUC contexts, where the combined impact of urbanization, post-modernization, and globalization change the worldviews of urban newcomers. Pre-urban worldviews are significantly impacted by the gravitational pull of post-modernity, which is promoted by globalization and urbanization. Consequently, and consistent with secular disenchantment theory, urban areas tend to witness a greater falling away from active adherence to traditional religions and an increase of de-facto secularism when compared to PRC communities. The worldview of migrants tend to be shaped by unique multi-cultural, linguistic, and historical factors, and within a PUC context, several dominant worldview themes may coexist or converge.

The impact of urbanization on worldview and the close relationship between urbanization and secularization impact the personal selves of community inhabitants. As Smith (2014) argues in his elucidation of the writings of Charles Taylor (*A Secular Age*, 2007), the more traditional societies associated with PRC environments are comprised of individuals with "porous" selves, that is, they are more open to external influences (e.g., demons, gods, forgiveness, and grace, etc.). In contrast, the net impact

of the combined forces of urbanization, secularization and globalization result in increasingly "buffered" selves, that is, people who are closed to external influences, living in the immanent, but haunted by the gods of the past and the missing transcendent dimension of life. Buffered selves however, may become porous selves in moments of crisis, becoming more open to external influences such as grace, forgiveness, or hope, and manifest an existential yearning for positive community experiences.

The transition from predominantly "porous" selves in PRC communities to increasingly "buffered" selves in PUC communities is reflected in the evolution of community people groups and group identities. In PRC communities, these are often delineated by missiologists and AFM missionaries along ethno-linguistic lines and are heavily influenced by religious identity. In PUC contexts however, people groups tend to be multi-ethnic segments gathering in "lifestyle clusters" within an urban society. Because of shared values or lifestyle, such groups tend to associate with each other in mutually reinforcing social cycles. Ethno-linguistic and religious delineation is less significant in the PUC context due to the increased impact of secularism in urban environments and the tendency to associate by age, occupation, education, socio-economic status, shared lifestyles, media habits.

Finally, in the PRC communities, media strategies tend to be more limited in nature. Primary use is made by FLWs of local informal communication strategies. This however is changing as smart-phones become increasingly ubiquitous, even in PRC contexts. However, in PUC communities, FLW media strategy tends to be highly visual and virtual. Extensive high-visibility and targeted formal and informal media strategies become necessary for engaging distinct and differentiated lifestyle clusters and socio-economic groups. Extensive and targeted use of locally appropriate social media, video production, messaging, infomercials, and awareness raising media is needed. FLWs must have a basic awareness of the use of the media tools available to them within their PUC community.

Having provided a brief overview of critical community dimensions within predominantly rural and predominantly urban contexts, the next section offers an overview of ministry strategy considerations for front-line workers (FLWs) in rural and urban environments.

Ministry Strategies for Front Line Workers in Rural and Urban Environments

Among AFM FLWs, formal community surveys are rarely used in PRC locations, but they are sometimes used to fine-tune the focus of an existing

felt-needs ministry. In contrast, in PUC locations, formal community surveys are essential for the FLWs to be able to understand the lifestyle clusters within the local community, their needs, demographic factors, religious affiliations, fluidity, and social mobility. This information is used to design felt-needs ministries and outreach strategies for each strata and lifestyle cluster of the PUC community.

In PRC communities, the location of ministry tends to be in personal homes or community infrastructure such as schoolrooms, ancestral domain land, or donated infrastructure. Particularly in indigenous communities, ancestral domain concerns require a substantial level of community support for any ministry activities. In contrast, PUC community members tend to prefer meetings in safe 3rd spaces for initial contact points, such as coffee shops, restaurants, after-school facilities, since the 1st and 2nd spaces (home and work/school) are often unsafe for initial friendships and spiritual discussions.

Language is a critical issue for FLWs. In PRC, the language used is primarily the heart-language of the community, with some knowledge of the local trade language required on the part of the FLW. The reverse holds true in PUC communities, where the FLW must be competent in the use of the local trade language, with some knowledge required of a particular heart language for specific ministry activities. Ministry may also take place in parallel language groups simultaneously, requiring intentionality in cultural sensitivity, scheduling of meetings, and identification of leaders for each ethno-linguistic group.

In addition to language, models of ministry tend to differ for FLWs in PUC and PRC communities. For those FLWs serving in PRC communities, the primary models of ministry tend to be the more traditional public meetings, church planting and worship facility construction, felt needs ministries, and one-to-one discipleship. FLWs often utilize well-tested, tried, and proven Adventist public and personal outreach models that can be learned in advance of community engagement. Sometimes the message reflects a very basic contextualization of pre-existing "pre-packaged" Seventh-day Adventist evangelistic materials.

In contrast, within PUC communities FLWs increasingly focus on (1) home fellowships, house churches, and small groups (either in personal homes or 3rd spaces) to build trusting and missional communities, (2) in congregation and worship group planting, (3) in Person of Peace (POP) and group leadership development, and (4) in operating a range of Felt Needs Ministries (FNM) and Centers of Influence (COI). Urban communities lend themselves to explicit Disciple Making Movement strategies given the higher population density, ease of communication, and relative

anonymity to be found in PUC communities. Although prayer is critical in any ministry context, PUC ministry models exhibit an explicit focus on prayer, seeking for the leading of the Holy Spirit, and the intentional learning by the FLWs of the unique social, economic, and spiritual needs and cultural access barriers of the people groups and lifestyle clusters they are seeking to reach.

The importance of Persons of Peace (POP) for community access differs in PUC and PRC communities. In PRC communities, the POP is theoretically essential for ministry development, but POPs are often not explicitly sought after as the FLW's relatively high social visibility in small rural communities guarantees them access to decision-makers and local thought leaders. In contrast, within PUC communities, the FLW is almost completely anonymous, and a POP is critical for reaching the various socio-economic groups and lifestyle clusters through the POP's social networks. An abundance of prayer and waiting on God is necessary as the FLW waits for the Holy Spirit to make divine connections. Formal surveys can also be used to identify POP who have had God-given dreams. Interestingly, rural thought leaders can often gain direct access to urban thought leaders and political leaders due to historical migration patterns and familial or clan relationships.

The significance of FNMs also differ depending on whether ministry strategies are being designed for PRC or PUC communities. In PRC communities, FNMs are needed to bring legitimacy to the FLW and create contact points and friendship with community members. In rural areas, FNMs tend to focus on the lower socio-economic or marginalized groups. Three critical factors impact FNM effectiveness in PRC communities: the duration of the contacts generated by the FNM, the personal intensity of the contacts, and the friendliness of the contacts.

FNMs however play a more significant role within PUC communities. They are needed to bring legitimacy to the FLW and create contact points and friendship with community members. Different FNMs are designed to reach lower and upper socio-economic groups, and should facilitate active participation and leadership by local lay members, new converts, and contacts, who prefer to belong before they believe. A variety of self-supporting FNMs is the ideal to reach multiple groups and provide service opportunities for all lay members. Ministries of compassion are as important as ministries of proclamation. Wherever possible, the FNMs are based on formal community needs assessments, and ideally are managed to achieve financial self-sufficiency within the local urban context. As Sabbath observance becomes increasingly problematic for new converts around the world, economically viable FNMs provide employment and both familial and social credibility for new believers who may have

lost their employment due to Sabbath concerns when they joined the local Seventh-day Adventist church.

Short-term mission trips are a common feature of many northern hemisphere churches, seminaries, and youth groups. In PRC communities, short-term mission trips tend to focus on bringing in much needed technical skills, for example, construction, well-drilling, electrical work, etc. The mission trip participants tend to focus on utilizing their technical skills themselves in construction, remodeling, or other such activities. Short-term mission trips also lead to short-term outreach activities such as leading a local Vacation Bible School program. In urban environments however, there is a greater availability of technical support and skills available at the local level. Short-term groups therefore, if they wish to "add lift" to the local missional community, find a more meaningful engagement with local community members if the short-term mission trip members tend to focus on technical training and professional upgrading of local professionals and the intentional equipping of local believers for ministry.

Finally, in PRC communities there is typically a demand for the construction of dedicated worship and ministry structures after the initial phases of the church planting process are complete. However, due to high land and construction costs within PUC communities, there is often a demand for safe spaces for worshipping groups to meet, for example. 1st spaces (homes, dormitories etc.) or 3rd spaces (local cafes, restaurants, after-hour programs in local school, etc.) Generally, these 1st and 3rd spaces already exist and do not need to be purchased or constructed. As such, the focus of the FLW is more on rental or negotiated access rather than construction and ownership for the initial years of the church planting process.

Having reviewed ministry strategy considerations for FLWs in predominantly urban and rural context, the next section focuses on personal factors impacting FLWs in rural and in urban environments.

Personal Factors of Front Line Workers' Leadership in Rural and Urban Environments

In PRC communities, the personal connections between AFM FLWs and local community members is predominantly person to person, face to face, whereas in PUC communities, there is a much greater role and need for social media and electronic communications in building a network of contacts and friendship. That said, however, person to person interaction and trust remains critical.

Traditionally, AFM FLWs conducted a "culture study" to gives insights into the local worldview, and capture missiological learning for new FLWs.

These culture studies could take 1-2 years to complete when combined with traditional missional tasks such as language learning, intentional relationship building, and community outreach activities. In PUC communities however, the traditional AFM "culture study" will not capture the full breadth of diversity of the urban community, reflecting primarily the insights from the relatively limited social network the FLW develop in their first few years' service. A guided longitudinal journal is recommended for FLWs in PUC environments that guides the data capture and prayerful reflection of the FLW Such captured insights can be passed on to new FLW colleagues. In addition, and as stated above, a formal community survey is critical to learning the key socio-economic, demographic, religious, and other key community factors, providing essential input to FNM design. And intentional reflection on the impact of post-modernity, secularism, and urbanization on the multiple local worldviews is also needed on the part of the FLW, particularly among the younger generations within the PUC.

As stated above, in PRC contexts the FLW tends to have relatively high social visibility. Often, the FLW is the only foreigner in the community and this serves to raise their visibility higher yet. FLWs tend to enjoy relatively direct access to community civil and religious leaders. Due to this high visibility of the FLW, greater emphasis is placed on becoming as much of a community insider as possible. In contrast, in PUC contexts the FLW is often relatively anonymous with little or no access to urban leaders, and thus needs great intentionality and prayer to gain access to the religious and civil leaders. Due to this social anonymity of the FLW, greater emphasis is placed on gaining cultural competency rather than being perceived as a cultural or community insider. This is particularly true when other expatriate urban dwellers engaged in purely secular or commercial activity are making little effort to be viewed as community insiders, preferring to work and socialize within their own expatriate lifestyle cluster.

Due to these relative differences in social visibility, in PRC contexts the gospel tends to flow initially through the FLW's own relatively new social networks and then increasingly via the POP's social network. In contrast, in PUC contexts the gospel may flow initially through the FLW's social network but subsequently and increasingly through a POP's well-established social networks. With greater economic opportunities in PUC contexts, tentmaking provides a viable platform for establishing social credibility and opening new social networks for the FLW, in addition to the added advantage of easier visa access. While tentmaking provides many theoretical advantages for FLWs in PUC contexts, tentmakers must be deliberate to ensure that they do not get caught up so much in their secular employment and the sheer effort of living cross-culturally that they lose

sight of their church planting goals. This concern calls for constant vigilance on the part of FLWs and their supervisors.

Discipling new disciples can be a very intense and personal experience for a FLW. In PRC communities, the FLW tends to disciple new believers, often in a didactic manner. Local lay workers also receive and then in turn provide additional didactic instruction to others in rural settings. Such lay workers are in regular personal contact with the FLW so they can participate in a personal discipleship process with the FLW and receive regular ministry training. It is assumed, not always correctly, that the FLW in the PRC understands the local worldview and spiritual context, and is sufficiently considered a community insider for such training and discipleship to be meaningful and viable within the local context. PUC contexts require a more inductive and disseminated strategy. Discipleship often takes place through a POP and local lay leaders discipling local believers, often in an inductive manner. The FLW cannot physically cover an entire urban context, for example, due to traffic congestion, so discipling takes place in a more explicitly Disciple Making Movement (DMM) framework due to physical necessity. Outsider-driven didactic methods often incorporate alien worldviews, logic, and conceptual complexity which together can inhibit discipleship multiplication.

This may provide a conceptual challenge to a Western-trained FLW who operates in the more traditional Bible worker model normally found in North America. However, the intrinsic advantage of inductive rather than didactic teaching styles in discipleship processes is that in the inductive process the Holy Spirit is the Teacher. This can lead to more rapid multiplication of disciples, whereas in the more traditional didactic approaches, the FLW is at the heart of the process, and teaching can only progress when the FLW or a trained lay worker is present. As a result of these factors, DMM strategies are almost imposed on the FLW in the PUC contexts if FLWs are to see a meaningful impact through their ministry.

In terms of the ethos of ministry that the FLW demonstrates, in PRC communities there tends to be a focus on winning trust, proclaiming, and gaining decisions for Christ via cognitive acceptance of doctrinal instruction. In PUC communities however, and given the alienation, disillusionment with hierarchies, and personal betrayal by inwardly focused religious and civil institutions that many post-modern urban dwellers experience, there is a need for a greater and intentional focus on ways to build personal trust before decisions can be invited for God.

These differences in ethos of ministry manifested by a FLW in different contexts impact the leadership styles that are manifest. In PRC contexts, particularly in isolated regions, the leadership style among FLWs tends to be more driven, task oriented, and centralized around the person and

family of the FLW and locally hired lay workers. This may be partly because an expatriate FLW often brings specialized and much needed technical skills, which makes the FLW stand out vis a vis local community members. Among urban dwellers used to open information flows via the internet, FLW team leadership ideally fosters open discussion and democratic decision-making processes, which in turn encourages member involvement / ownership in FNMs and other outreach activities. Functional leadership tends to be more effective than appointed leadership in multiplying groups, and the intentional servant leadership development of known discipleship multipliers is more effective for catalyzing movements than appointing and mentoring formal leadership over static congregations.

Summary

The current and rapid urbanization shift of the global population calls for an intentional focus for missionary sending organizations such as AFM in what it means to minister in the growing urban centers around the world. This article outlined three critical dimensions of ministry that impact ministry strategies in predominantly rural and urban contexts for AFM Front Line Workers (FLWs). First, the community contexts within rural and urban environments. Second, the ministry strategy considerations for FLWs in rural and urban environments. Third, personal factors impacting FLWs in rural and in urban environments. The article provides in summary form the three key critical dimensions of ministry shared with AFM FLWs during initial training and that are utilized post-launch by AFM FLWs with their supervisors when prayerfully demonstrating urban ministry strategies within their unique urban contexts.

Beyond these critical dimensions however, two factors are critical for mission for all AFM FLWs: the presence and leading of the Holy Spirit and a God-given love for the cities where they minister. These two factors cannot be programed into people, but they can be prayed for, trusting that the promise of Jesus in Acts 1:8 will be as true in the 21st century as it was in the 1st century.

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