

## **...To the Whole City** *Language and the Word "City" in the City Reaching Movement*

### **Problem**

CIR has used "The whole Church bringing the whole Gospel to the whole City" as a shorthand version of our purpose. Traditionally the "whole Church" has been very difficult to understand and actualize because of differences in theology, practical problems with understanding of what the church is and is about, historical splits and political problems within the "Church" that prevents parts of the church from acknowledging other parts of the church. The "whole Gospel" has a bit more clarity. Recent theological statements and historical creeds have affirmed that the "Gospel" is all encompassing in scope. The Lausanne Covenant and the Manila Manifesto speak of salvation of individuals and bringing righteousness to institutions and regeneration not only in the next world but also in this world. One of the best descriptions of the "whole Gospel" was quoted by Jesus in Luke 4. The whole Gospel includes giving "good news to the poor...announc[ing] freedom for prisoners, sight to the blind, [to] free everyone who suffers and to say, 'This is the year the Lord has chosen.'" The specifics of this "whole Gospel" are as difficult as the "whole Church" but theoretically there is a basic agreement as to the fact that there is a "whole Gospel."

The "whole City" is similarly difficult for CIR and others to conceive. There are four basic problems with understanding the "whole City." The first is a geographical problem. In common usage the word city has specific boundaries. You can point to a spot on the ground that divides one city from another or "the city" from "not the city." If we use the actual word "City" are we alienating the suburbs?

This is complicated by the second problem; the fact that the church in general and the Evangelical church in particular has turned its back on "the City." The second problem is a mission problem. With the rise of Protestantism, especially the American volunteerism style of Protestantism, the church began concentrating on holding itself up not against the world or as a light to a specific area, but against the other "Churches" that were around it and as a light to the "Church." With the loss of the conception of the parish the local church began to look to people that were like themselves, in theological understanding, in socio-economic status, and in race and culture. This was likely accentuated by the increasing diversity of the world. As cities grew and travel increased people became more aware differences between themselves and the "other." A traditional conception of the parish required that all people within a specific geography be acknowledge and ministered to by the local church. While this has likely never been practiced completely, the modern church is as far from the idea of a parish as it has likely ever been. Without a conception of a parish, the whole church can not comprehend the "whole City" because most local churches do not feel responsible for a specific group of people let alone a specific area.

The third problem of understanding the "whole City" is a very practical one. Many of our cities have populations that number in the millions or at least the hundreds of thousands. The complexity of the city and the diversity of its peoples, churches, ministries and needs boggles the mind. All people have a limit to the number of people that they can personally know and relate to. If this is the case, then how can we, as Christians, love and minister to the "whole City?" Using Chicago as an example, the city of Chicago has approximately 3 million people, with approximately 2900 churches. The surrounding area has more than 250 separate municipalities with more than 6000 additional churches and an additional 5.5 million people. These people live in an area that is approximately 3600 square miles. The area is a single economic and media unit. However it is unlikely that a pastor and congregation in Zion, IL (far northeast) will ever closely relate to a pastor and congregation in Chicago

Heights (far southeast). Many other area of the world have similar problems that vary only in scale, but not in difficulty.

A fourth related problem with the term “City” and “City-Reaching” is in the context of rural areas that are not “cities.” No one in the “City-Reaching” movement wants to discount the need for rural areas and small towns to be “Reached”, however the term city would be very misleading, if not alienating, in these contexts.

## Possible Uses of the word City or its Alternates

CIR members and others interested in “City ministry” use the word “City” in a variety of ways. Paul Dozeman<sup>1</sup> uses “City” in the following way for his newsletter *City View*, “City is used as a generic term to define an area with a natural boundary. ZIP codes, school districts, city limits, wards, neighborhood associations, or rural routes can all be considered “cities” in this context.” By this definition, any area or group of areas can be called a “City.” The strengths of this usage is its flexibility. The definition is self-imposed and can be edited with any need. Unfortunately this is also its weakness. Outsiders will usually not understand the definition without education. It will also be a cause for debate among the members of the group, wanting to include one area and exclude another.

Dennis Fuqua<sup>2</sup> has written several articles about the “Church of the City.” In his article *The Third Paradigm of Ministry* he has the following quote, “Geography was the only boundary the New Testament writers allowed in the Church. When the Church of the New Testament took any steps to be identified on a foundation other than that of geography, Paul slapped them on the wrist and told them to stop it! (1 Corinthians 1:10-13; 3:1-9; 12:12-26).”

Fuqua continue in this article to describe the three possible options for the use of Church in the New Testament. The first option is the “City” church, i.e. the church of Jerusalem<sup>3</sup>. The second option is the regional option, i.e. the church of Asia or Judea.<sup>4</sup> The final option for describing a church is a household, i.e. the church at the home of Nympha.<sup>5</sup> This final option is most like our current usage of church.

However, if we re-discover the use of the word church as Fuqua posits then we would also be require to re-discover the geographical references as well. The advantages of this “Biblical” language choice are is the variety of language used to describe different sizes of geography. While it is not specific (Is Chicago a region or city? Should Chicago’s city reaching movement change its name to “One Great Region”?), it gives the ability for organizing the church into three realms of work while still keeping a clear view of each of the others. The problem with this variety of language is that education is still required to help new-comers to understand our definitions.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Dozeman (pdoze@cityrestoration.org) is the director of City Restoration Ministries in Hudsonville, MI.

<sup>2</sup> Dennis Fuqua ([DennisF@MULTNOMAH.EDU](mailto:DennisF@MULTNOMAH.EDU)) is the director of International Renewal Ministries in Portland, OR

<sup>3</sup> City locations: the Church in Jerusalem (Acts 5:11; 8:1 & 3; 11:22; 14:27; 15:4 & 22), the Church at Antioch (Acts 11:26; 13:1; 15:3 & 30) the Churches in Iconium, Lystra, and Pisidian Antioch (Acts 14:21-23), the Church at Caesarea (Acts 18:22), the Church at Ephesus (Acts 20:17; I Timothy 3:5 & 15; 5:16-17), the Church in Cenchrea (Romans 16:1), the Church in Corinth (I Corinthians 1:2; 11:18; 14:23; 2 Corinthians 1:1), the Church at Philippi (Philippians 1:1; 4:15), the Church at Laodicea (Colossians 4:16; Revelation 3:14), the Church at Thessalonica (I & 2 Thessalonians 1:1) the other Churches of Revelation (Revelation 2:1, 8, 12, & 18; 3:1 & 7)

<sup>4</sup> Regional locations: in Galatia (1 Corinthians 16:1, Galatians 1:2), in Asia (1 Corinthians 16:19a, Revelation 1:4), in Macedonia (2 Corinthians 8:1) in Judea (Galatians 1:22).

<sup>5</sup> House locations: at Priscilla and Aquila’s house (Romans 16:5, I Corinthians 16:19b) at Nympha’s house (Colossians 4:15), and Philemon’s house (Philemon 1:2).

A third option suggested by Ken Oliver<sup>6</sup> is to move toward the Greek word “Polis” to describe our geography. *Polis* has a regional concept that is lacking in our English word City. It also could be used to communicate smaller geographies such as towns or even open rural areas. *Polis* has the advantage of being an unfamiliar word for many Christians and non-Christians alike. The unfamiliarity allows people to use the word without the baggage of other words.

A fourth option suggested by Dean Comerford<sup>7</sup> is the word community. This like *Polis* and Paul Dozeman’s use of the word city, allows for a self definition of geographical boundaries. Community is not a boundary word, it is a relationship word. The church, no matter what the size of its local grouping, is essentially a community. The city as well defines itself, often not by geography but by a feeling of oneness. My neighbors rarely identify themselves as being from Chicago, but instead they are from Hyde Park, a neighborhood within Chicago. Similarly when out of town my suburban friends often identify themselves as being from Chicago, although it may take them an hour or more to get downtown. Dean Comerford said it this way, “A community is like a well, where people are drawn together to drink. It has fuzzy edges. That means we can concentrate less on where it starts and stops and focus more on reaching all of the people who feel connected to it by their choice.”<sup>8</sup>

At some time we have to look at the dictionary to decide the “official” meaning of the word “city.” According to Webster’s<sup>9</sup> there are three definitions for city: 1) A large town, 2) A corporate town; in the United States, a town or collective body of inhabitants, incorporated and governed by a mayor and aldermen or a city council consisting of a board of aldermen and a common council<sup>10</sup>; 3) The collective body of citizens, or inhabitants of a city.

These definitions do not allow for the crossing of incorporated boundaries. While this is clear, it does separate. One traditional problem in the US Church is the geographic split between racial and ethnic groups. If this definition of city is used, it may give license to discrimination, overt or not.

## Toward a ‘Solution’

There are no easy solutions in language problems. The beauty and horror of the English language is that there is no final and complete definition of any word. The solution for your area will likely be different from the solution of another area. The first step is to have a discussion with your constituents to determine if there is a language gap. This will be important not only for the naming of city reaching projects but also the language that is used to communicate these projects. If there is a language gap then grace needs to be used. What groups are feeling alienated by the variety of language? What groups have traditionally held the “power” in the area? Should these “powerful” groups be allowed to make the decision because of their ability to bring others to their understanding? Or should the “weaker” groups be held up with more care in order to bring about reconciliation? When there is a language gap there will likely be more than just two different language understandings and these understandings often will not split down according to easily understood lines of difference.

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<sup>6</sup> Ken Oliver ([oliver@thecommongood.org](mailto:oliver@thecommongood.org)) of the Protestants for the Common Good in Chicago, IL, suggested this idea after reading an earlier draft of this article.

<sup>7</sup> Dean Comerford ([deano@otatarachurch.co.nz](mailto:deano@otatarachurch.co.nz)) works as a City-Reacher in Invercargill, New Zealand. He suggested this idea after reading an earlier draft of this article.

<sup>8</sup> This comment was in an email to the author Sept 13, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.dictionary.com/search?q=city> (Sept 26, 2002)

<sup>10</sup> These alternate definitions were given for Great Britain: a town corporate, which is or has been the seat of a bishop, or the capital of his see. A city is a town incorporated; which is, or has been, the see of a bishop; and though the bishopric has been dissolved, as at Westminster, it yet remaineth a city. --Blackstone

When Gorges constituted York a city, he of course meant it to be the seat of a bishop, for the word city has no other meaning in English law. --Palfrey

## Final Thoughts

Allow me to make a final comment about the use of geographic words. As we specialize in our ministries, the completeness of ministry to a general area can be lost. The conception and use of words like City or *Polis* or community have two different and potentially opposite effects. On the one hand, city can be a polarizing word. For instance, if you are in the city, you are not in the suburbs. It can create an “us against them” feeling. On the other hand, city can have a unifying effect. We are a part of a larger body that brings unity and we are forced to rise above our individual sociologically targeted ministries and look at the ministry of the entire church; even if we continue to participate in the smaller ministry where we have been called to serve.

We as Christians need to have a unity that is based on love for one another and for our Lord and not a unity based on a perceived enemy or other (the suburbs, the city, the neighboring community, etc.) This need for love is one of the reasons why language is so important and why we as leaders need to make others’ perception of language more important than our own.