



[Dalian Skyscape by egorgrebnev via Flickr](#)

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As China becomes increasingly urbanized, an urban theology for ministry is needed. As modern man finds himself slowly enmeshed in urban living, he experiences materialism, relativism, and an increasingly segmented society. He questions what is real and true, and who God is. These questions can become points of contact for urban ministry. Dr. Ma provides some guidelines for forming an urban theology for ministry in urban China.

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The author sees two major categories of urban churches in China that are experiencing transformation and goes on to discuss three main areas where he sees this transformation taking place. Viewing these changes as positive, he also believes they are growing stronger.

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After defining “new media” and what it encompasses, An looks at the various ways the church in China views it, what it means for the church, and how it can affect the church. He then gives some thoughts on how the church should deal with it—not only the challenges it brings, but how it can be used positively.

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Interview by Mary Ma

An interview by Dr. Mary Ma with the minister of a migrant-worker urban church which identifies a number of issues characteristic of urban churches comprised of migrant workers from rural areas. These concerns include living conditions, economic status, long work hours, mobility, and other factors that all contribute to the church’s spiritual health and stability.

Book Review

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A Review of China’s Urban Christians: A Light that Cannot Be Hidden by Brent Fulton

Review by LI Jin

Due to urbanization and social change, China’s churches look different today than they did a number of years ago. Urban churches, with unusual diversity, now comprise a major part of Chinese Christianity. Fulton identifies many of the changes the church has experienced that now characterize it and discusses challenges it faces in current society.

Resource Corner

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Affluenza: A Documentary on Urban Consumerism

Is China’s urban life style following in the footsteps of America? This documentary presents the situation in North America as of 20 years ago, but the same undercurrents are at work in China today. To better understand China today and the challenges this trend poses to Chinese urban Christians, watch *Affluenza*.

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Items that require your intercession.

Editorial

Urban Urgency and the Great Commission

By LI Jin and Mary Ma, Guest Editors

As a new urban generation arises, China's churches are experiencing an "urban urgency" to carry out the Great Commission in its global cities. They are wrestling with some of the same questions Christians in other countries are also facing: What does the city mean for the church? What does urbanization bring? How do churches understand their urban environment? Are churches ready to face the needs and challenges of urban life? Are there new ways to carry out the Great Commission in urban centers? With these questions in mind, this issue of *ChinaSource Quarterly* seeks to focus on the theology and practice of urban ministries in China.



[Keyboard by Ash Kyd via Flickr.](#)

An urban sociologist by training, Mary Ma integrates analysis of urban living with theological discussion to formulate a contextualized urban theology for ministry. She stresses that urban Christians have to understand the Bible and their urban setting in order to live as Christ's disciples.

From his extensive ministry experience in a Chinese urban center, James He summarizes three major changes in urban churches during the past two decades. His insights help ministry workers learn about the past and present states of urban churches in order to move forward in their ministries.

Jerry An enthusiastically invites ministry workers to consider creative ways to evangelize and disciple, especially through innovative ways of using new media, such as WeChat platforms. While encouraging them to use technology to facilitate evangelism and Christian fellowship, An also reminds urban Christians of its temptations.

The next two articles focus on practices of Christian churches in urban contexts. Pastor Cui describes how his charismatic church reorganized in metropolitan Shanghai. They reflect on their theology and programs to fill the many needs in a competitive and broken environment. Pastor Sun is leading a church in a city which is made up of rural migrant workers—the invisible and deprived labor force of an urban economy. Their socio-economic status makes them a distinct subgroup of urban churches. This interview with Pastor Sun informs readers of rural migrant believers' church life in the city.

Li Jin's book review on *China's Urban Christians: A Light that Cannot Be Hidden* by Brent Fulton brings the discussion back full circle by looking at the changing trends of urban ministry which were set out at the beginning. In this issue's Resource Corner, we recommend an older documentary on urban consumerism to you. We find it aptly conveys an important part of urban life in China that calls for Christians' witness.

We trust this issue of *ChinaSource Quarterly*, "Christian Living in the City" will help facilitate meaningful discussions of urban ministry in China.

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The City and the Church: Towards an Urban Theology in China

By Mary Ma

Since market reform in the late 1970s, fast urbanization has been the second structural transition in Chinese society. To those who believe in social progress, urbanization is a trend worth celebrating, and an urban living style is a sought-after dream. However, urban sociologists (Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and George Simile) long ago warned against the negative effects of urban conglomeration on social relationships, including increasing social atomization and anonymity, dispersion of responsibilities, rising crime rates, urban inequality, and relative deprivation.¹ Living in an urban setting also has implications for the social psychology of its residents, sometimes termed as “an ontological anxiety,” that is, the loss of one’s selfhood and identity while trying to measure up to wealth, achievements, and transient social relationships.² It is also the reason why therapeutic programs have become more popular with the trend of urbanization, even within the church.



[Rainy day in Shanghai by Ric Lim via Flickr.](#)

In his classic work *The Meaning of the City*, French theologian and sociologist Jacques Ellul offers an exegesis of “the city” in the Bible, integrating sociological insights with Christian anthropology and eschatology.³ Ellul points out that, after the Fall, seeking urban settlement has always been a human tendency, a search for security. The first city was built by Cain to replace God’s Eden. The city has since taken on a “spiritual dimension” that rewards human talents, reason, and self-sufficiency. Its development is inevitable, for after the Fall, human beings have always been participating in the ongoing work of creation in this world, generating cultures and civilizations. The city is a convenient and efficient human living space for it pools resources and relies on and also speeds up the use of technology. Urban living happens under God’s common grace for human flourishing, but Christians should heed the temptations behind such developments. Biblical theologian, Geerhardus Vos, claims that although the city serves as a cultural engine for human civilizations, it also has been an accelerator for human, sinful capacities.⁴

According to Ellul, the city has an eschatological nature. In this sense, I think that urban sociology can be called an eschatological phenomenology. Ellul claims that there is a reason why the book of Revelation uses Babylon, a city—not a kingdom—to symbolize all human rebellion. The word “city” manifests the conglomeration of human activities. Dallas Willard also points out that the biggest temptation for humans lies in the building of a Jerusalem with human effort.⁵ It is then not surprising that the book of Revelation also uses “city” to denote the final gathering of the godly, the heavenly Jerusalem which was built by the Creator and Redeemer. Missiologist J. H. Bavinck summarizes different dimensions of human religious consciousness that the gospel message satisfies: (1) a sense of transcendent norms, (2) a sense of governance of existence by a destining power, (3) a sense of relatedness to a supreme power, (4) a sense of belonging to the whole, and (5) a desire for external deliverance.⁶ I think that the last two are especially pertinent to the development of an urban theology for ministry. When modern people find themselves gradually being embedded in webs of urban living, they are flooded with materialism, relativism, and an increasingly segmented society. Despite these webs of confusion that form as obstacles for people to know God, questions like, what is reality? what is true? and who is God? are still inescapable for the human soul—and these are exactly the points of contact for urban ministry.

What further socio-theological implications are there for living in cities where there is a mixture of both political ideology and consumerist capitalism like China? It can be even more complicated than the urban setting in the West. **Primarily, there is a dominant narrative of a state-led urban success story that Christians should be aware of.** Our understanding of how urbanization happens, although not without state actions, is an integral part of our worldview. Urbanization, like structural changes in other spheres of life, happens by God’s providence. Our gratitude for daily providence and our religious allegiance is to God only. Some churches over-contextualize the gospel in urban culture to the extent of creating a social class of Christian bourgeoisie. For example, an expensive Christian Montessori education model in Shanghai has become a sought-after option for families of young professionals with preschool-age children. This early path of elite education creates a consumerist mentality that values high expenses for quality, urban living. Admittedly, there should be options so that well-to-do families can decide on educational resources for their children. At the same time, urban conveniences like these educational programs insulate people in a prosperity-centered worldview which accepts all that is urban as good and desirable.

Second, the dominant narrative of social progress inevitably imposes the “jungle rule” of competition on people. In China, it has given rise to a ruthlessly cold, social Darwinism, and recent decades of urbanization have only exacerbated this. I find that even among urban Christians, a gradation of social status in society is taken for granted. Consumerism invites young urbanites to keep up with the Joneses. It is easy to detect marks of secularism like materialism or relativism, but in comparison, social snobbery is more subtle. Urban society has become increasingly stratified. The church should be a place where such social barriers break down, but one can still observe churches that are predominantly white-collar, or churches that are made up of migrant workers only.

Third, a vast range of urban social problems are neglected or dealt poorly with by the urban church in China. In urban churches shaped by fundamentalist and pietistic traditions, ministering to needy groups in the city is sometimes considered social gospel that distracts from the church’s main mission of seeking more conversions. Even in mission, a utilitarian mentality can still be prevalent. This is an example of under-contextualization, when churches are unable to engage with their surrounding cultures. Of

course, given the political constraints, the spectrum of creative mission works in urban China is relatively narrower. However, there is a lot of work to be done in Chinese Christians' awareness of social injustice in the economic systems and social institutions. If the urban setting poses a systemic challenge, then there needs to be systemic rethinking in contextualized Chinese theology.

Based on the above discussions, I list a few summarizing thoughts on an urban theology for ministry in urban China.

1. **Know the urban context.** Leaders of urban churches should equip themselves with a sophisticated understanding of how urban culture works. As systematic theologian John Bolt says, the reason human beings can build social relationships with each other and cultural entities is because of "our nature as embodied spirits and our spirits enable us to rise above the limits imposed by our materiality." In Chinese theology, a tendency to separate the secular from the sacred, or even along Gnostic lines, has crippled church ministry in the area of cultural engagement. Nevertheless, throughout the history of Christ's church, God accommodates human culture by transplanting the seed of the gospel into different ethnic and cultural soils, yielding the wonderful diversity and unity of Christ's universal body.
2. **Diagnose its spiritual temptations.** Even in a society with religious freedom, urbanization itself poses spiritual challenges. Wealth and power often wed themselves closely to exclude humility before God and dependence on God's providence. However, the deepest human desire, that is, the soul's longing for God, cannot be satisfied even in such a place of material abundance. So in the midst of all distractions and temptations, the city invites gospel ministry. Given China's official ideology of elevating urban living as a sign of social progress while discounting other social problems, churches should guard their understanding of urban living against such a dominant narrative and be on the alert against urban pride. Urban living does not define who we are. Preachers can dissect consumerism, work ethics, the achievement culture, and other moral failures of urban living and preach on them; however, a more sober theological reflection on the spiritual effects of urban living is needed for leaders engaging in urban ministry. Based on these reflections, ministers may find some spiritual disciplines helpful, such as simple living, a media fast, Sabbath-keeping, solitude and silence, spiritual retreats/conversations, spiritual journaling, meditative prayer, serving the poor, and others.
3. **Live counter-culturally and prayerfully.** Christians are living in exile even while in a seemingly secure and sufficient urban context. Out of a sober understanding of temptations and unsatisfied longings, Christians should have confidence that the gospel of Jesus Christ has something most precious to offer to their urban neighbors. Urban glamour and achievement cannot satisfy people. Christians are called to testify for righteousness and to pray and intercede—just as Abraham did for Sodom and Gomorrah. In a country like China, where Christianity has been politically censored from public media and culturally marginalized, there is a sense of inferiority among members of the church when trying to evangelize their urban neighbors who may appear successful and sufficient. Sometimes the gospel is presented as something that would meet one's need only if there is one. The church needs teaching on how to be intentionally, and boldly, counter-cultural.
4. **Cherish Christian fellowship and gather sincerely.** Urban-dwelling Christians should cherish fellowship and gather often as the body of Christ to fight against subtle temptations in the urban space. The body of Christ is the greatest mystery, a spiritual gathering of the righteous. God's city is hidden in the earthly city of lust. Jesus Christ is their "hard reality," forcefully opposing all the lusts and temptations offered by the city. Believers are misfits, but they are indestructible. They are pilgrims walking through a Vanity Fair. Christians should value their freedom in Christ and refuse to be captivated by the city's glamour and achievements. These teachings are urgently needed in Chinese cities where even Christians' interpersonal relationships are fragmented and fleeting, just like the general pattern of social relationships in the city. Sincerity and love lived out in Christian small group fellowships can be the best witness to people living in social apathy.
5. **Care about social justice.** The city has many hidden recesses of brokenness that invite Christian charity as a witness to the gospel. Historically, cities with the homeless and poor all became ministry hubs for Christian churches. Social justice in the form of caring for the abandoned, the neglected, and the marginalized should be an important part of an urban church's mission. Christians should fight against the culture of urban apathy. Only the gospel of Jesus Christ has the power to heal urban wounds and renew urban culture. Chinese churches that see overseas evangelism as the only meaningful mission may overlook these crying needs at their doorstep.
6. **Serve creatively.** Aided by technology, Christians can creatively minister to their neighbors. With censorship continuing in China, the use of the "new media"⁷ is an example. It can allow community mission to take on various forms. At the same time, as Ellul suggests, one has to be alert as to how technology can exert control over how people live. In China, where propaganda dominates the media, Christians especially need to heed the loyalty of their hearts to the truth of God and the truth of reality.

Wherever Christians live, city or countryside, their social environment is a magnifying lens of their heart condition. There exists no holy soil to which Christians can retreat; at the same time, there is no darkness that the gospel of Jesus Christ cannot conquer—including even the dark corners of the city. Living in the city challenges Christians to be more alert to spiritual temptations and, at the same time, more confident in the power of the gospel.

¹ Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, translated by W. D. Halls (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 39, 60, 108; Max Weber, *The City*, original 1958, translated and edited by Don Martindale and Gertrud Neuwirth (New York: The Free Press, 1966); George Simmel, "Metropolis and mental life," in *Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. K. H. Wolff (Chicago: The Free Press, 1950).

² Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford University Press, 1991), 214.

Three Changes in Urban Churches

By James He

I came to faith in the late 1990s through a student fellowship group on a university campus. Since that time I have been living in a large city and witnessing the urbanization process of house churches in China. By “urbanization of the church” I refer not to a physical church building in a city, but how a church actually takes root in a city and turns into a “a place of harvesting” to influence its community.



一二三井 by tsukacyi via Flickr (cropped)

Currently, there are two major categories (people or churches) of urban churches that are experiencing such a transformation. The first category is traditional house churches that maintain a pious, conservative tradition and believe that the Bible is inerrant. Some, however, are somewhat closed-off and believe that the purpose of the church is to maintain its conservative faith to the very end. The other category is fellowships founded by missional, parachurch organizations that are primarily student-oriented and full of energy for preaching the gospel. They have an active community life, but they have a weak understanding of what makes the church. Fellowship and evangelism are the two primary reasons for the existence of this type of church.

Both of these kinds of churches/fellowships were greatly used by God to revive the gospel during a particular historical period in China. However, in the past decade I have observed and experienced three changes in urban churches that are healthy and biblical.

1. From ministry-oriented to theology-oriented

The first change is a theological transformation. Fifteen years ago, when we asked why we evangelized, the answers we often heard were, “Because there is a great need,” “Because the Great Commission tells us: Go!” “We must seize the opportunity to save souls.” These are all good answers and very effective. Even today, I still miss those days of great enthusiasm when we knocked on doors in the students’ dorms and preached the gospel to those we did not know. At the end of each day, we reported to the leader that day’s “gains,” but we never asked what on earth our great mission was. What are the incentives for evangelizing? Is it just to go? Is it to get a reward from God if we bring people to him? Is it to have someone read the Four Spiritual Laws and challenge them to say the sinner’s prayer?

To a certain extent, many people started to find out that there is pride in effectively bringing people to the Lord. We discovered this the first time we heard a Bible scholar tell us that the actual command in the Great Commission (Mathew 28:18-20) is to “make disciples” instead of “going” and even “baptizing.” We read the Westminster Shorter Catechism and found it to say that the primary purpose of life is to “glorify God and enjoy him forever” instead of “bringing one more to the Lord.” The emergence, alleviation, and transformation of such a tension were due to a growing theological seriousness on the part of individuals, fellowships, and churches. We started to reflect on the biblical basis of our own ministry work. We desired to return to a more biblical understanding of our ministry, our motivation, and our methods.

The most obvious change is this: the spread of the gospel is no longer the ultimate goal; rather, glorifying God is. Second, ministry is no longer about the pursuit of increasing numbers of converts; rather, it is paying more attention to the gospel taking root in a person’s life. Finally, many churches are gradually replacing parachurch organizations as the frontline in evangelism.

2. From parachurch-led to church-led

For a long time, an unwritten division of labor existed between student evangelism organizations and churches’ evangelistic ministries. Evangelism organizations were responsible for bringing people to the Lord and churches were responsible for shepherding them. Certainly this was a step up from when organizations and churches did not work together at all. The gospel has been preached widely, and students have become involved in the ministry work of organizations. At the same time, churches can put more energy into training church workers and doing intensive pastoral work. However, there are obvious problems that accompany this arrangement. Churches gradually became a “receiving” type of church instead of churches that evangelize. In addition, organizations that stress love for each other, daily care, and individual resolve make it difficult for the fruit of their labors to become part of a church for a long time. Many people who came to the Lord through parachurch organizations and who attended college student fellowships or student churches found their identity in a student fellowship instead of in a church.

By the sovereignty of God, something happened that was not purposely planned by any individual, church, or denomination. Parachurch workers have been influenced in recent years by Reformed theology. For example, the ministry 9Marks¹ has given workers a deeper understanding of the church. After churches and organizations cooperated more closely, parachurch workers started to become involved in the ministry of the local church. In the past five years, parachurch workers have gradually left their organizations and become church ministers. With this shift, organizations have been constantly shrinking and phasing out work as people leave or find other ministry areas.

In many big cities student ministries that were once led by evangelistic, parachurch organizations have gradually shifted to being church-led or denomination-led. Two positive changes have resulted from this: First, students from early on establish a stronger con-

cept of the church. The problem of “how to transfer from a student fellowship to a local church,” which troubled churches and organizations for a long time, now, no longer exists. Second, church-led evangelism allows for more people to be involved and does away with the unhealthy cooperation model of “funded by the church and done by an organization.”

3. From individual evangelism to Sunday preaching

Individual evangelism with the goal of leading someone to pray the sinner’s prayer is a very common evangelism model in both parachurch organizations and the church. Some churches strictly follow this kind of process: individual evangelism, become part of a small group after praying the sinner’s prayer, attend a baptism class, attend Sunday worship after being baptized. Most churches are not that strict. However, over a relatively long period of time, urban house churches developed a mindset that evangelism outside the church is something conducted by individuals, while Sunday preaching has defaulted to focusing on professing Christians. This ministry model easily lends itself to new believers making an artificial separation between “righteousness” and “sanctification,” and viewing “conversion” as an individual action instead of a group action.

At the same time, there are two invisible thresholds for attending Sunday worship in some cities: The first is that you must be a Christian. The second is that you must be a Christian with a certain level of Bible knowledge who can understand “spiritual jargon.” If someone who had never heard of the Christian faith entered a church on Sunday, that person probably would not understand thirty percent of what is going on.

If we say that early “conversions” are largely due to Christians’ “persuasion,” then in the short-term most “conversions” are the result of non-Christians participating in the faith-lives of Christians. The primary experience of this is participating in Christian worship on Sunday. There is an important theological consideration here: Acts 2:47 describes a time when the Christian community’s worship life was open to the public. “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” Also, in the past five to ten years the preaching of Chinese house churches has been influenced by Reformed theology. Many churches are gradually giving up their formerly moralistic preaching styles and fundamentalist interpretation methods in favor of biblical theology and Christ-centered preaching. It is not surprising that the minds of non-believers are captured when Christ is exalted by the Word of God. Finally, because of the influence of Tim Keller and the neo-Calvinists of The Gospel Coalition, there is a new wave of pastors who are attempting to enter into culture, to understand culture, and transform it through the gospel. There is no “spiritual jargon” in their preaching. They interpret God’s Word and make the gospel clear to people by using language normal people understand. This in itself is the reappearance of the incarnation.

These three changes are growing stronger, and are enough to make people look forward to the next fifty years of the urban house church in China.

¹9Marks exists to equip church leaders with a biblical vision and practical resources for displaying God’s glory to the nations through healthy churches. They hold international conferences for church leaders and provide materials in several languages including Chinese. See the 9Marks website at www.9marks.org.

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³ Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011).

⁴ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003).

⁵ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (HarperCollins, 2009).

⁶ John Bolt, James D. Bratt, and Paul J. Visser, eds, *The JH Bavinck Reader* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2013).

⁷ For a definition of the “new media,” see the first paragraph of the article “Urban Public Space and New Media Ministry” in this issue.

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Urban Public Space and New Media Ministry

By Jerry An

Over the past decade, with the development of social media and mobile Internet access, “new media” has become familiar to all. Especially in China today, WeChat, with its integration of communication tools, social networks, payment options, and other functions—all working together as a whole—has become an indispensable tool in Chinese social life. Its high degree of penetration and extensive communication capabilities, coupled with strong media dissemination capacity, means that WeChat has become the most important platform for all media organizations.

The church is also involved with this new media. It has become the “battleground” for conflicts that vie for the hearts and minds of China’s people. There have been several different views and attitudes in churches about its use in ministry or evangelism. The first view is conservative with doubts about how little the new media can achieve—if anything—and a negative belief that it will probably do more harm than good, so it is not worth bothering about. The second view is neutral; the new media can be used for good or for bad depending on how one chooses to use it. The third view is dialectical—that media has its ups and downs. Its good cannot be used to deny its bad; neither can its bad be used to deny its good.

The use of new media has extended the spread of Christianity into the huge public space. In a sense, the media has illuminated the public nature of the church so that the church can enter the mainstream with the right of discourse and have broader influence. At the same time, a church’s internal issues—especially negative events—can easily be brought into the public space for discussion and attract social attention. So, the church must actively explore the right way to communicate with society at large in this new media era. Otherwise, the church’s right to discourse and influence in the public space will easily be lost as will its right of interpretation of its affairs, identity, ideas and belief. Worse still, heresy might slip in through a communication vacuum to affect, or even corrupt, the social perception and image of Christianity and thus, eventually, harden the soil for the preaching of the gospel. Pastors and elders need to learn how to act as the church’s public relations intermediary in the new media era; they also need to teach believers how to share their faith and witness in this public space of a pluralistic society.



MG 2617 by Philip McMaster via Flickr.



别让你赖以生存的手机，成为生存危机

2017-05-27 今日佳音



Screenshot of an article via *Good News Today*:
“Don’t let your lifeline cell phone become a life crisis”
Note: New media is being used to warn about new media.

New media subverts the mass media elements and traditional media business models. With the continuous reduction of technological and cost thresholds, churches and believers can more easily start a so-called media ministry. Taking 2016’s most popular live-streaming posts as an example, what was achieved with the use of expensive equipment and satellite transmission by a large number of professionals is now possible with the use of a smart phone connected to 4G internet. With a little more investment, worship meetings at different church sites as well as other events can easily achieve live, interactive broadcasting. Without the help of professionals, the average person can learn to do this. Relevant online training courses are abundant, and most of them are free of charge. Compared with other platforms, new media has become the easiest one to use.

In the new media era of “everyone is media and everything is media,” everybody is a publisher of information and everyone is information at the same time. In the same way, as the Christ who we follow is God’s message embodied and also the only living way to access this message, we Christians are the media and the Christian church is the media. Such a transformed view helps us to see new media ministry in a way that leads us back to its biblical origin. Media is a natural attribute of the church, as well as its function. In a sense, the church is the largest news agency. New media is not a ministry working on its own, but it needs to be fully applied and integrated into every aspect of church ministry, including worship, fellowship, visiting, giving, and even church planting.

Through new media, each believer can be a missionary. With the popularity of social media, one’s circle of friends is more a reflection of one’s interests, hobbies, personality traits, and even quality of life. Each photo posted, each dynamic update, and even each forwarding and thumbs up depicts our lives and values. New media provides a “God’s perspective” for others to know us and for us to know ourselves.

New media has opened a broad space for Christians to share the gospel with their relatives, friends, classmates, and even strangers. Each Christian should treasure the opportunity to accept the calling of this era to live out the gospel message and influence other lives by his own life through new media. Wesley said, “This world is my pasture.” In the past, the pasture parish represented a spiritual commitment of a Christian and a church to the community. Today, our circle of friends is our pasture and evangelism should become a lifestyle.

At the same time, we need to see the challenges new media brings to the church and to Christian ministry. In China, for example, new media has turned a former lack of resources into the current surplus. However, the quality of much of the information published varies from source to source and some information comes from dubious sources making it difficult for the audience to be discerning. People’s reading time and ability is limited; eating too much junk food will destroy one’s appetite for a good meal. The new media has diluted the impact of credible media agencies. Also, a large number of emerging, self-medias skip the important professional proofreading and editing processes rendering it difficult to guarantee publishing quality. Directly facing his readership, a writer is more tempted to cater to his readers' thinking when conventional royalties are being replaced by readers' tipping. The new media has brought about a stratosphere effect with more emphasis placed on feeling rather than reflection, on position rather than facts. Also, writers’ different theological ideas and political views are being accessed through the new media with more ease which can lead to more disputes and confusion, eventually causing harm to our common faith.

These characteristics of new media reflect the epochal character of the fourth industrial revolution: a subversive change. The fourth industrial revolution has targeted mainly traditional, authoritative entities. Among them, the church was the first target. While holding fast to the faith and respecting tradition, we need to think and respond to various aspects of theology and ethics. Some traditional ideas, ways of thinking, and management models in churches and ministry must be changed and renewed. The most important strategy is to integrate. In particular, most Chinese churches are still at the peripheral position: they are misunderstood and discriminated against—and even hostilely persecuted in the social environment. Christian roots in Chinese society are still shallow and tender. Real, local forms of theology, thoughts, and arts are far from being shaped; excellent resources are still lacking. New media provides opportunities and possibilities for integration. Churches need to work with professional organizations, leaders, and believers and they need to coordinate with other churches to form a matrix so that the church can spread its influence effectively.

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Translation by ChinaSource.*



[Weibo phone by Julien GONG Min via Flickr.](#)

View from the Wall

Pastoring a Charismatic Church in Shanghai

By CUI Quan

High population density, limited living space, and soaring real estate rental costs are all characteristic of cities. The utilization of space to its maximum can also mean increased road congestion, lack of parking space, and living inconveniences. Until 2009, our congregation in Shanghai worshipped in a facility located on Wuzhong Road with 1,900 square meters of space and a parking lot of 50 spaces. These were crowded conditions for the 1,500 worshippers who attended; furthermore, there were traffic jams at the Wuzhong Road entrance on Sunday mornings which put a burden on the neighborhood. If church attendance would have increased to 10,000 or more, it would have been a disaster for the local community. The church is to be a source of blessing, service, and help to the community—not a burden and problem maker.



However, our church, the Universal Mission Church, which had experienced a brief revival and growth spurt, has gone through a significant transformation following the refining experience that resulted from the ban in 2009.¹ The concept of pastoring megacity churches has given way to finding a new church model that retains the advantages of smaller churches yet allows the church to thrive in any environment.

Both the cross-removal campaign in Zhejiang Province in 2014-2015 in which crosses on church buildings were removed forcibly by government authorities and information about church development in Central Asia shared by a missionary have confirmed that the path we have chosen to follow is consistent with God's will. The Universal Mission Church must take the time to walk a path that is entirely new—a path that churches of today are unwilling to walk—a pioneer path for China's churches.

“Big church, small congregations” is a model of unity for church government: one vision, one training system, the same Sunday message. However, when it comes to the specific form of congregation, there are many independent ones. Each congregation has no more than 150 people—a group larger than 150 will be divided into two. The full-time pastors of the congregations meet every Monday and Friday to worship and pray together, share their own congregations' issues and concerns, and explore the scriptures and sermon topics for the following week. We preserve the DNA of the Universal Mission Church. We are one church utilizing our integrated strengths for one mission, yet each congregation maintains the concept of small group discipleship. The leader is responsible for shepherding, discovering, and building up new workers. Small groups submit to the authority of the pastor of their congregation, and the congregational pastors in turn submit to the authority of the senior pastor.

The foremost emphasis of “big church, small congregations” is oneness—that is, one church. Why one church? An evangelical church should be a church with scale and capabilities that enable it to act swiftly when necessary. Experience tells us that it is challenging for individual churches to connect with each other while large churches can better take action. The concept of small congregations is that small-scale churches can be strategically located in every corner of the city. The transformation of a city's spiritual condition is dependent upon not only the influence of large-scale churches, but more importantly, assemblies of Christians that are found in the streets and alleyways to daily worship, pray, watch, and guard the cities.

After the modification within the Universal Mission Church, its overall vision has remained unchanged: the mission direction stays the same; the path of small congregations remains unchanged; the enthusiasm for evangelism is more solidified; the dedication to missions' work will be even deeper while the way of pastoral ministry modifies. The most significant change is that the church goes back to the DNA of the Chinese house church through suffering: Grounded in the Bible, praying often, preaching for life, accepting suffering, and seeing miraculous signs and wonders as normal experiences.

The vision of our church is “turning many disciples into Christ's servants so that together we fulfill the “50-500-5,000 Great Commission” of world evangelism. A born-again Christian who is a dedicated disciple of Jesus needs to cultivate 50 other productive disciples in his or her lifetime. Our church divided the city into 500 districts for worship assemblies. We also plan to connect with more churches to help plant over 5,000 independent churches across the entire nation. Led by this vision, we will firmly walk the path of church branches and church planting, changing our ministry model from the Walmart supermarket store concept to that of the 7-Eleven chain stores.

In a large church, excessive systemization and extensive processes often exist; church workers, especially full-time workers, serve in an overly professional way. Their work is more technical, not necessarily involved in serving people directly. As a result, most serve

with self-protection or are satisfied with meeting tangible objectives. Their zeal to serve cools over time; their ministry calling becomes diluted, and eventually they lose their original sense of mission.

After a church adopts the new model, workers in branch congregations have a relatively greater sense of responsibility because they are directly involved in shepherding people. They become accountable and feel that the work they do is directly linked to their calling. Like their senior pastors, they have the same unceasing passion and motivation to serve. Additionally, through their practical pastoral experiences, they receive directly from God his provision and satisfaction. While working hard and making continuous progress, these workers' gifts are developed and used by the Holy Spirit to bring healthy development to the church.

The overall church leadership makes its decisions through a five-fold ministry team with differing spiritual gifts. When a direction-setting decision is needed, the prophetic team prays for God's will first. Next, the results from the prayers are examined by the team of teachers to see if they are consistent with biblical teaching. Finally, the decision is made by the apostles' team. This team approach contributes to the prevention of personal fame.

Each worker in the church partners with other workers. They watch and pray for each other. Even pastors responsible for leading branch congregations are under the umbrella of the pastors' team. Though they have authority and responsibility, they too are being shepherded. In the eyes of society, they are simply pastors of churches, ordinary men of faith.

A church made up of branch congregations has the flexibility to both centralize and decentralize—decentralization in shepherding, assembly, and church management, but centralization in training and evangelism, oneness in vision and unity in prayer. This means the relationship between the senior pastor and the congregational pastors is very important. It enables good communication, free expression of feelings and emotions, as well as exploration of biblical truths together. These help strengthen the relationship between the senior pastor and the pastor of a church plant. With respect to the hierarchical authority permitted by God and under the protection of such authority, both pastors can have a more effective ministry.

Church planting in China is still a relatively new concept and we need to be prudent in our initial steps. Perhaps experiences from past failures and attempts will help us as we move forward. It is our sincere desire to learn to accept the more advanced model from the West by equipping church planters, providing family health assessments and psychological counseling, setting pastoral direction, and establishing pastoral philosophy. In addition, it will be beneficial to provide assistance to church planters in designing Sunday worship, building teams, selecting church workers, training and growing small groups, and other initiatives. We have just begun this journey, and this present model, which needs further development, can benefit from ongoing discussion and research. There may never be a perfect church model, but we are willing to obey God's will to discover, execute, and create a healthier and more suitable model for China's church.

¹ Editor's note: Pastor Cui's church experienced pressure from the government in 2009 and they had to worship outdoors.

*CUI Quan is the lead pastor of Wanbang Church in Shanghai.
Translation by Ping Ng.*

Peoples of China

Conversation with a Migrant-Worker Church Minister

Interview by Mary Ma

The following is an interview conducted by Dr. Mary Ma with Pastor Sun, the minister of a migrant-worker urban church. The interview begins by identifying three models of churches: rural, urban, and the “in-between” churches made up of rural migrants located in a city. A unique group, these urban churches take on characteristics that are rooted in the rural church.

Dr. Ma: *How would you describe the three different church models based on demographic and geographical differences—rural, migrant-worker, and urban? What different needs and challenges does each have?*



[Workers having a break by Julien Mattei via Flickr.](#)

Pastor Sun: A rural church is a gathering where local believers in the countryside meet to fellowship with each other. Most of the believers are relatively older and their education is mostly at the junior high level or below. Their theological doctrines come from the background of traditional house churches and show little evidence of a strict belief system. Very few of their ministers work full-time; even fewer are supported by the church.

A migrant-worker church is a church where the majority of people are transient workers from outside the local area. These churches are concentrated in first, second, and third tier cities. They share some characteristics with rural churches, but have less stability and a higher turnover rate. There may be some members who have bought a property in the city and have gradually settled down. Most ministers are from the countryside and lack solid theological grounding. Some may have the opportunity to receive better training to help their church function more normally. Members are mostly younger people with high school- or college-level education. They have full-time ministers who are partially supported by the church, but generally ministers need additional financial help from their families.

Rarely are urban churches made up entirely of the native population. Rather, they have mostly young and highly educated newer residents. There are also a few local, older churches in this category. Ministers in these urban churches generally have stronger theological training, and some may even have been trained in an overseas theological seminary.

As far as church constitution, almost all the churches in the three models are evangelical, but generally not too deep theologically. Few have clearly stated tenets and healthy structures.

Dr. Ma: *In addition to the Bible, what other books do you usually read? Are there any books or pastors’ teachings that have impacted or helped you?*

Pastor Sun: Mostly I read books on Reformed theology. I’m also more impacted by biblical theology taught by denominational ministers. Before it was more American Baptist, but now it’s more Presbyterian.

Dr. Ma: *Many members in migrant-worker churches are only living above the poverty line. How do their living conditions and economic status influence their understanding of the gospel? How does the gospel help them overcome their identity as sojourners in a strange land? What unique issues does this group face?*

Pastor Sun: Basically, their living conditions and economic status do not affect how they understand the gospel, which is solely the work of the Holy Spirit. However, migrant-worker church members do have more practical challenges that may affect their growth in the truth. They may spend less time reading the Bible and in prayer. Except for those who own a property and have settled down, born-again Christians can appreciate the temporary nature of city living which feels like a pilgrim’s progress in the world. They struggle to settle here because they do not have access to the welfare the city promises, especially when it comes to children’s schooling. They long to have their families together, but with little hope of finding work back home and the desire to buy a house, they face a lot of economic pressure.

Another great and very real problem is that couples are separated because one of them needs to stay behind in rural areas to care for their children. This difficulty often plagues a believer if he does not have a strong foundation of faith. The children’s schooling needs and the prospect of eventually returning to their hometowns can compel migrant-worker church members to leave their churches. Therefore, migrant-worker churches are badly in need of stable members for the church to develop deeper roots.

Dr. Ma: Do issues like long work hours and mobility affect the members' church life and spiritual growth? What strategy or message do you use to overcome these problems?

Pastor Sun: That's for sure. For those whose faith is superficial or unclear, a job change will lead them to leave the original church. This makes consistent teaching and follow-up very difficult. Because of this, we emphatically teach the principles for choosing the right church. They shouldn't just go to the nearest church or change churches whenever they have to change jobs, but rather they should be committed to look for jobs near the church. Or when they do change jobs, they should stay with their church even if it is now farther away. Of course it's more important to grow and build up their knowledge of the truth and all these problems can then easily be addressed.

Dr. Ma: Believers who come into the city to work may form their own small circles based on where they're from. Does this create challenges to building relationships in the church? How do you teach them to live out unity in the Spirit?

Pastor Sun: It is possible that some churches may have this challenge. For example, people from Wenzhou may identify more closely with each other. However, workers from other regions don't mind this. People from different places actually can learn from each other and about each other's cultures and practices which facilitates interaction.

Dr. Ma: While migrant workers are brothers and sisters in the Lord, perhaps because of different education levels and income they may form different groups. How do you shepherd members with higher education and income?

Pastor Sun: For those members with higher education and income, I would emphasize the importance of reading spiritual books. I would train them to express doctrines more accurately, and like other members of the body, they need to grow in personal devotions and relationships with other members of the body. Although they have higher incomes and education, it is not something they should brag about. Those who have been given more by God should also be held more accountable.

Dr. Ma: With regard to marriage and the education of children, what are some of the challenges you face while shepherding your congregation? What are your strategies and needs?

Pastor Sun: There needs to be more detailed teaching on the principles of marriage. Whether it's premarital counseling for younger people or teaching the meaning of marriage for families, it starts with a biblical perspective, keeping the wholesomeness of the marriage covenant through commitment and the love of Christ. The quality of the marriage directly affects the quality of the children's upbringing, especially in spiritual matters.

If only one spouse is a believer, it's usually the woman. It is very challenging to teach a sister to submit to an unbelieving husband. This requires constant building up of the sister's faith and spiritual maturity, because it is difficult to counsel or communicate with the husband. This also involves other practical issues like the children's education and other family matters. To a believing wife, it certainly is not easy to learn to submit without violating biblical principles. First and foremost she needs to genuinely change herself to earn her spouse's trust and also to help with the children's spiritual growth. A focus on family worship and helping children memorize answers to basic doctrinal questions are all simple and effective ways to help ground children in the truth.

Dr. Ma: From a theological point of view, what do you see as the benefits and challenges those of us living in the urban environment have in our understanding of the gospel or spiritual growth?

Pastor Sun: Access to transportation and information is relatively easy in the cities. Therefore it is advantageous for receiving higher levels of theological training and quality spiritual resources. At the same time, in densely populated cities, Christians can come in contact with different groups from different social strata, from different professional fields, and from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, and can share the gospel or fellowship with them. Regardless of whether or not they become believers, once they return home, they will carry what they heard with them and that will impact their communities. However, the fast-paced lifestyle can also cause indifference towards the gospel. Those who have attained a higher degree of spiritual maturity and a clearer understanding of doctrine, on their return to their hometowns, will take with them enormous help for their churches, including for the Christian leaders.

Dr. Ma: Do you or your church have any established relationships with urban churches? Do you want to build such relationships? What are the challenges?

Pastor Sun: Our church has started to emphasize interaction with urban churches, especially among ministers with similar theological beliefs. Such fellowships already exist but need more depth and willingness to commit. We need ongoing communication which is necessary for reaching agreement in basic theology and organizational principles. This is an effective way to develop healthy unity and accountability. As ministers, we all have our own ideas. How to sacrifice oneself, be humble, and work together requires practice, mutual sharpening, and recognition. There is a long way to go.

Continued on page 14

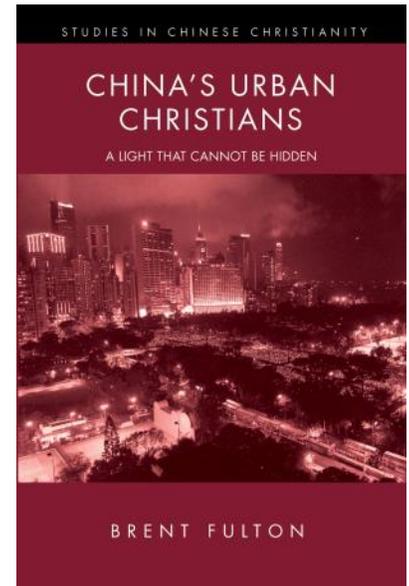
Book Review

A Much-Needed Update about Chinese Christianity

China's Urban Christians: A Light that Cannot Be Hidden, Brent Fulton, Pickwick Publications, Eugene, Oregon, 2015, 156 pp. ISBN 13:978-1-62564-719-1; paperback, \$20.98 at Amazon.com and \$9.99 Kindle edition.

Reviewed by LI Jin

Since the market reform in 1978, Chinese society has undergone an unprecedented structural change known as urbanization. The urban population is now sixty percent of the total as compared to nineteen percent in 1980. More than 500 million rural residents have moved into China's urban centers. Studies on Chinese Christianity have yet to keep up with the implications of this change. Chinese churches sometimes still enjoy the stereotypical description of being rural and uneducated, persecuted but revived. With urbanization and social change, China's churches have acquired a different landscape with diverse structures and expressions of faith. This requires scholars, as well as Chinese Christians, to adopt a different lens in examining the growth of Christianity in the midst of various social trends. For this reason, *China's Urban Christians: A Light that Cannot Be Hidden*, ChinaSource president Brent Fulton's recent book, is a timely update to our understanding of Chinese Christianity. As a long-time China observer, Dr. Fulton knows well how significant urbanization, with its offers of technology, population concentration, wealth, and commercial boom, is going to impact Chinese Christianity. Urbanization inevitably provides both opportunities and challenges to Christian groups in China.



As Fulton points out in this book, in this phase of frenzied change, China's urban churches make up a major body of Chinese Christianity with unusual diversity. Most constituents have received higher education and entered middle-class professionalism (10). With such demographic changes, churches are also going through a period of professionalization. Today, the unregistered churches in China look very different from their rural counterparts thirty years ago. More and more clergy are obtaining theological education and pastoring churches with a professional spirit. Unlike their predecessors, these leaders are no longer "the silent majority." As Fulton writes, "...they are seen as professionals fulfilling a rather unique, but nonetheless legitimate, role in society. Their public presence vis-à-vis government, media, academia, and other social domains gives the church a voice in the society which it previously did not have" (36). These young pioneers of the faith know how to use new media to express their faith and to localize their theological concerns in Chinese soil. Fulton pays attention to how Christians actively engage in cyber discussions as one important dimension of their urban social life despite tightening Internet censorship. Meanwhile, Fulton also observes the weaknesses of these professing urban professionals: "Professionalism also widens the gap between clergy and laity, replacing the church's former collegiality with a new class system that differentiates between those with formal training and those without" (37).

Urban Christians in China also face new spiritual challenges. In chapter four titled, "A Shifting Battleground," Fulton points out materialism, secularism, and pervasive moral decline in the urban space. Piety is no longer an assumed characteristic of the Chinese church; rather, it is struggling with the same worldly tides as its Western counterpart. Influences from economic market activities and post-modern thought are making their way into urban churches turning many into groups carrying consumeristic marks. Fulton quotes a statement from a young urban pastor in an interview that, "The church is a social club (*julebu*). The pastor depends on exciting programs to keep people entertained . . . Believers expect God to bless them. They wouldn't know what to do if they encountered difficulty" (55).

Besides consumerism, Fulton also examines the marriages and families of these Chinese Christians. This young generation of urban Christians is swimming against the tides of one-child policy and communist ethics that intervene in family life. These are brand-new problems for these first-generation, urban Christians. Fulton insightfully captures a catalyst for social transition, that is, the growth of an ethical system that differs from traditional values in China.

Institutional changes are taking place in urban China as well with many Christians withdrawing their children from public schools and starting Christian schools and charity organizations. Churches develop various social service programs with creativity when reaching out to their urban neighbors. Trends that are countering consumerism and promoting social service are internal drivers for the improvement and transition of Chinese society. Fulton hopes that, "Doing so would gain the church legitimacy within society as Christians are seen caring not only for their own needs but also for the needs of their community" (66). This hope is partially realized in the social realm, although not to the liking of political authorities.

Any study of Chinese society has to face the paradox of its reality. On the one hand, registered churches are having the crosses on their churches removed in a few provinces. On the other hand, we have to admit that churches in China are enjoying a certain degree of freedom. Policies may affect churches differently even in the same location. Take Beijing for example. Shouwang Church and Zion Church, both unregistered, are treated differently by the local authority. This poses difficulties to China researchers because they have to present fairly both the particularity and universality of Chinese Christianity. Previous studies on Wenzhou Christianity and commercial ethics, for instance, have to readjust their understanding after the recent "cross removal" campaigns. Researchers always need to face criticisms against their methodology in using qualitative, non-random interviews. Representative surveys often have the trade-off of simplifying the cultural and local nuances. Given the research strategies we have now, this book is a commend-

able effort to depict and analyze the real landscape of Chinese Christianity that is becoming increasingly urban. The presence of Christians in China's urban centers needs to be considered by sociologists and historians who desire to understand China's social transition within the twenty-first century. This public phase of Chinese Christianity is relevant to the growth of China's civil society and public life. Connecting the good earth of China with a heavenly kingdom, their stories record the changing China, and their voices need to be heard.

LI Jin is a PhD student at Calvin Theological Seminary. Prior to seminary he was a PhD candidate in economic history at a Shanghai university. He has been writing on Christian thought for media outlets both in mainland China and Hong Kong.

Translation by Mary Ma.

Dr. Ma: How can we pray for you and your church?

Pastor Sun: Please pray:

1. That our church, from minister to congregation, will constantly make sure our theology is correct and that it will shape our belief system in practical ways.
2. That God will prepare elders and deacons to plant churches with a more complete range of institutions.
3. That God will build on the foundation of our existing local churches and that they would have a complete church network so that we may be committed to one another and develop into a bigger, regional church while not neglecting the growth of each individual church.
4. That God will continue to be gracious toward the ministers and provide for their theological training.
5. That God will grant us wisdom and perseverance in building up Christian family worship and spiritual training for children, to build our houses on the rock of his truth.

Mary Ma (MA Li) holds a PhD in sociology from Cornell University. Currently a research fellow at the Henry Institute of Christianity and Public Life at Calvin College, she and her husband Li Jin coauthored articles, book chapters, and recently a book on Christians in mainland China. The pastor being interviewed ministers in a migrant-worker church in a Chinese city.

Translation by Alice Loh.

Resource Corner

Affluenza: A Documentary on Urban Consumerism

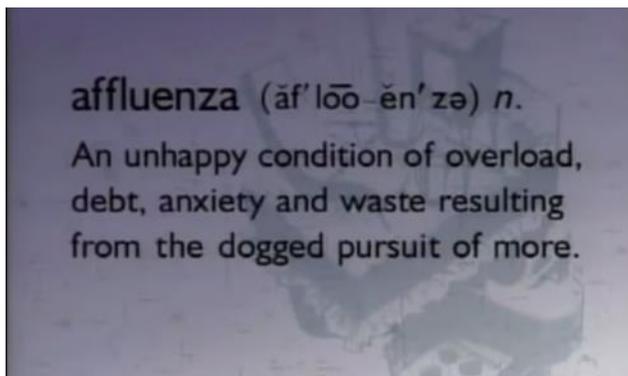
Directed by John deGraaf and Vivian Boe, Bullfrog Films
USA, English, 56 minutes
© 1997, KCTS Television
Presented by the Pew Charitable Trusts

What is affluenza? Can it be cured? How dangerous is it? Where is it found and how prevalent is it? Many questions come to mind including:

- Can happiness be bought?
- Will affluenza lessen stress?
- How does it affect marriages?
- How does it affect society?
- What's the difference between the GNP and the GPI?

Is China's urban life style following in the footsteps of America? This documentary presents the situation in North America as of 20 years ago, but the same undercurrents are at work in China today. To better understand China today and the challenges this trend pose to Chinese urban Christians, watch [*Affluenza*](#).

Film available for viewing on [YouTube](#).
Also available on [Amazon](#).



Intercessory Notes

Please pray

1. For China's Christian leaders and pastors as they recognize changes in the church over past years and grapple with developing a theology of ministry that encompasses the new realities.
2. That China's pastors of urban churches will recognize the changes that have occurred over recent years, the need for new methods, and the willingness and ability to adopt new forms of ministry.
3. For China's church leadership as it deals with the "new media" and learns how to use it in wise, productive ways to further the gospel while standing against its possible negative effects.
4. For growing congregations that are adopting the "big church, small congregations" model. Pray they will have wisdom and understanding of the many factors involved as they introduce this new type of church.
5. For migrant workers' urban churches and those pastoring them. Pray that the leadership will have wisdom as well as creativity in dealing with the many unique difficulties these churches face.

