



URBAN CURRENT

An urban primer

More than half of the world's population today lives in urban areas. By 2050 this will increase to 75 percent.

Cities not only run the world, they color the entire world. You may live in the back hills of West Virginia, or in the middle of nowhere in west Texas, but you live in an urbanized world.

I hope what follows not only helps you understand the city, but helps you understand the urbanized world you live in, no matter your address.

What makes a city a city?

IMMENSITY - Tokyo, population 13.3 million, is huge. Istanbul, population 14.3 million, is vast. Manila, population 16.5 million, is unbelievable. Houston sprawls forever. The Chicago metropolitan area is roughly 100 miles by 50 miles.

Urban scale can be overwhelming, impractical. This immensity accommodates disparity. Here in Chicago, our glittering Magnificent Mile (Michigan Avenue) is a universe apart from Madison Street cutting through the burned out and beat down West Side ghetto. Immensity accommodates a level of degeneracy. Immensity enables anonymity.

DENSITY - Immensity plus density creates an energy that is invigorating and exhausting. My neighborhood, Logan Square, is roughly a mile and a half wide by two miles long. Eighty thousand people live here. Our neighborhood is surrounded by neighborhoods of not dissimilar size and density. Those neighborhoods are jammed up against similar neighborhoods and so on. So many people in so little space. The noise, the dirt, the search for a parking spot all relate to density. So many sinners per square inch creates a spiritual intensity difficult to fathom. Help us, Jesus!

DIVERSITY - To the density we add diversity.

It is ethnic and socioeconomic. It is also generational, national, and philosophical. It impacts not just the dining scene, but the arena of ideas. Hordes of humanity are jammed together, each person with individual life experience and world view. Competing interests, conflicting ideas, all contribute to the milieu. Wow!

COMPLEXITY - This is not only a product of the above, it is added to the above. Related to the already identified elements, it also becomes its own force and influence. Again, my own neighborhood, due to the political machinations of the Chicago power structure, has seven different city council members, each representing a portion of the community. I have to deal with seven different council members!

We used to do big outdoor back-to-school rallies. One year we noted we had close to 100 grade schools represented and over 25 high schools. Hmmm.

VELOCITY - Now we add velocity. The city is in constant motion and not at a turtle pace. There is an urgency, an energy that permeates the atmosphere. Transiency is just part of this. People come, they go. They rent here for a year or two and then they move over there for a year or two. Or, they move into the city for three years and then are moved on by their company. A couple buys a condo. A couple years later a baby comes. They start looking for a house. Life stages. Career moves. Economics. Family demands. Oh my!

INTENSITY - Immensity plus density plus diversity plus complexity plus velocity equals an intensity that must be experienced to be understood. The confinement of so many people, sights, sounds, scents, movements, dwellings, vehicles, businesses, schools, interest groups, forces, and powers brings an intensity to urban living that is unequaled. Think of the concentration of the forces of spiritual darkness

in a given city. Whew!

Interestingly, this intensity is felt as an exciting energy by newcomers. They don't realize that after a while they will come to resent what they found so exciting. They will likely come to resist the very thing that perhaps drew them in the first place.

Each of these elements can be tracked, studied, dissected, and applied sociologically, politically, historically, spiritually, and ecclesiastically. Each element interacts with and impacts each of these spheres. What does all of this mean in practical terms?

About 30 years into pastoring Armitage, I was told our database contained every name we had ever collected from people attending anything at our church. I never knew this. I thought when people moved, died, got lost, we deleted the names. Not so. At that time, we had over 35,000 names. I know for a fact that many people have attended services and other activities and not filled out a registration card. I estimated we had a minimum of 50,000 people through our doors in 30 years. I realized why I was having trouble remembering everyone's name.

I can also tell you that it may take three hours or longer to make a single hospital visit in a city with more hospitals than some counties have patients. I have visited people in over 70 hospitals in the Chicago area.

Rush hour??? Fugetaboutit!!!

Everything in the city is magnified, multiplied, and intensified: the good, the bad, the ugly.

Paul wrote to the saints in the world's first mega-city, "I am eager to preach the gospel to you in Rome."



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