

Anthony WagenerSmith

Urban Church Planting: Three Functional Shifts from the New Testament

Introduction

While the rural context remains important to church planting (see Nabel 2002), today more than 50% of the world's inhabitants live in urban areas, from both the global north and the global south. Utilizing the criteria by which individual countries define an "urban area," the United Nations has documented the unprecedented growth in these areas from 751 million in 1950 to 4.2 billion in 2018 (UN DESA 2018). This vast group represented 55% of the world's residents in 2018 with an estimated surge to over 68% of global population by 2050. When contrasting the impact of Seventh-day Adventist mission in the countryside and villages with that of the great cities of the world, the challenge has appeared overwhelming and unnerving since the late 19th century: "Our workers are not branching out as they should in their efforts. Our leading men are not awake to the work that must be yet accomplished. When I think of the cities in which so little work has been done . . . I feel an intensity of desire to see men and women going forth to the work in the power of the Spirit, filled with Christ's love for perishing souls (White 2012:142).

And yet there is cause for hope. If, before the second advent, the Spirit-empowered preaching of the gospel to all people groups in the setting of the three angels' messages will take place (Matt 24:14; Acts 1:8; Rev 14:6-12), the multiplication of churches in unentered urban contexts must become a reality. You cannot have the global spread of a message without tangible groups of believers that speak and embody the message in every domain of life.

Indeed, the very pulse of Adventist ministry beats strongest through apostolic mission. A basic consideration of the practical and exegetical link between the second advent of Christ and the apostolic witness for

Christ¹ must generate significant shifts in thinking and practice. Describing these as *functional shifts* rather than paradigm shifts—to emphasize the connection between theology and practice—what better framework to reflect upon urban church planting than that of the New Testament Church. Looking through a disciple-making and church planting lens, one can be challenged by three functional shifts for urban mission today: from places to people, from performers to equippers, and from affinity to diversity.

From Places to People

The mere mention of planting a new church evokes two inevitable questions: “Where will it be?” and “When does it start?” Such a response demonstrates the prevailing paradigm among believers and non-believers alike; namely, that church is a program implemented in a building on a weekly basis. In spite of the best missiological thinking and practices around disciple-making and all-of-life evangelism, if there is no building and weekly program, then to most there is no real church. Christians have often drifted to the place where their theology of church is greatly hindering the mission of church, particularly in urban areas considering the high cost of renting or owning physical space. While in no way minimizing the significance of programming, as well as the biblical injunction to not forsake assembling together (Heb 10:25), a functional shift in church planting from places to people will result in more rapid multiplication of new churches and—ironically—a mission-focused context to the purpose and function of church buildings themselves.

Temple as the Place where Heaven and Earth Meet

The temple as a place where heaven and earth meet was God’s idea. In the Exodus experience, the Lord instructed Moses: “Let them construct a sanctuary for me, that I may dwell among them. According to all that I am going to show you” (Exod 25:8-9 NASB used throughout). Often referred to as the “tent of meeting,” it was filled with the glory of the Lord at its completion (Exod 40:34-35), and became instrumental in prefiguring God’s plan of salvation, as its priestly services were a copy and a shadow of the heavenly sanctuary (Heb 8:5). Originally designed to be a portable meeting place (Exod 40:36-38), it later became a stationary temple in Jerusalem. Angel Rodriguez—while describing the physical sanctuary itself—also demonstrates how God’s plan to meet with humanity spilled out far beyond physical space, even in Exodus.

Through Moses, God made an appointment with the Israelites at Sinai (Ex. 3:12). They traveled to that mountain, prepared for the meeting (Ex. 19:10-11), and on the third day met the Lord (verse 18). Sinai became the first Israelite sanctuary (verse 12; 24:2-5, 12). The Hebrew sanctuary perpetuated the Sinai experience, a place where God met with His people (Ex. 29:43; Ps. 68:17). (cited in Dederen 2000:381)

While a synthesis of common themes between sanctuary and the creation narrative suggest a much broader concept for the tabernacled of God with humanity (Rodriguez 2002), in the course of God's redemptive mission in the Hebrew Scriptures, the physical temple became the primary sacred space through which heaven and earth would collide.

The Church as a Living Temple

By intentionally ripping the earthly temple's veil at the time of Christ's sacrifice (Matt 27:50-51) and subsequent founding of his church, God established his people as the primary vehicle through which heaven and earth intersect. Out of multiple metaphors used for church in the New Testament, the temple imagery is central to mission, and repositioned in the light of Christ. The lives of those who form this new reality—built upon Jesus Christ, the chief cornerstone, and filled with His Spirit—function as his temple both collectively and individually depending upon the context (1 Cor 3:16, 6:19; Eph 2:20-21; 1 Pet 2:4-6, etc.). The shift in emphasis from holy places to holy people in the New Testament Church, far from a disjunction, is indeed the realization of God's vision for a sacred people as communicated in the Old Testament (Exod 19:5-6; Lev 20:26; Deut.7:6, 26:18-19).

The biblical teaching of church as people on mission, rather than a program in a building, complements temple imagery as the foundation for a functional shift in church planting. Used 115 times by the writers of the New Testament, the word for church (*ekklesia*) never once refers to a physical building. Geographically it is used in the context of church as a universal reality (Matt 16:18; Eph 1:22-23; Col 1:18), church as those with city-wide affinity (Acts 8:1, 11:22; 1 Cor 14:23) and church as those groups that also meet in homes (Rom 16:5, 16:23; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phil 1:1-3). The *ekklesia* is a living and dynamic expression of those gathered in Christ's name, functioning as his post-resurrection body through which he fills all things in all places (Eph 1:22-23), not merely a building on the seventh-day of the week. While looking at the New Testament's particular expressions of church as descriptive rather than prescriptive, the underlying values that produced missional effectiveness must be recaptured (Allison 2012:45).

Shrink-Wrapping a Living Temple

While far more complex than a single person or event, the Roman Emperor Constantine, through the nationalization of Christianity in Europe, played a central role in the degradation of church as a living temple. In AD 313, he declared Christianity the official religion through the Edict of Milan. In AD 327, he began an aggressive project to construct Christian temples after the pattern of pagan temples in honor of their gods and goddesses. Such a move likely received strong support by his relic-collecting mother Helena, having recently returned from the “holy land” (Barna and Viola 2008:20-21). For at least one hundred years, Christians had already been gathering at the graves of dead martyrs, which were considered holy places. Consequently, the first “Christian temples” were built on top of the supposed graves of these dead martyrs. Subsequently they bore the names of the dead martyrs over whose supposed graves they rested: St. Peter’s, St. Paul’s, Church of the Holy Sepulcher (supposed graves of Peter, Paul, and Jesus), the Church of the Nativity (supposed site of Jesus’ birth), and others.

In spite of the historic Protestant Reformation, the Christendom shrink-wrapping of a living temple into a physical building is still the dominant understanding of church today. Darrell Guder documents how this reality is in part shaped by the reformer’s view that a legitimate church is both the place where religious things happen (what specific religious things happen according to various traditions), and as a vendor of religious goods and services (1998: 79-84). Broadly speaking, the five primary left-overs of Christendom, which still undercut mission today are the parish mindset, the perception that church is Western, a reductionist gospel as personal salvation only, consumerism, and missions as that which happens exclusively in foreign lands (Wood 2006:12-14). Because of a partial reformation in ecclesiology, the case can be made that the concept and function of today’s Protestant pastor is, in many ways, that of a slightly reformed Catholic priest (Barna and Viola 2008: 127-141). Given the historical paradigm of church in a box, the biblical teaching that after Calvary there is no designated holy place on earth, must reformulate our praxis of mission. God’s design that heaven and earth intersect through the individual and corporate lives of all believers—as a living temple—disrupts all of urban mission, particularly church planting. In addition, out of all Christian groups, should not the Seventh-day Adventist Church, with its emphasis on the heavenly sanctuary as the holy space in heaven, be on the cutting edge of such a movement?

Implications of a Living Temple for Church Planting

As a first consequence for church planting, God's people must always communicate about the church biblically when building teams and casting vision. Given the ties between use of language and culture modification, the phrase "go to church" should be eradicated from our vocabulary. Far beyond an exercise in grammatical policing, people simply cannot visit something that they already are. People can go to the church building and can go to meet with their church family, but they cannot go to a physical space that sections off their spiritual life from their everyday life and call that church. Rather than tearing down, such biblical communication actually builds up a healthy context for church gatherings and physical spaces. While it is possible to build a church without building a building and it is also possible to build a building without building a church, it is impossible to build a church without building up people. Even where resources exist to purchase first-rate buildings in urban areas, if the founding members cannot functionally be the church without a building, then their missional impact and multiplication potential—not to mention their very survivability—is low.

The elevation of ministry in everyday life is a second basic consequence. Since a new church launches in the gathering of believers on mission, not merely the beginning of a worship service, it is helpful to think of ministry planting rather than church planting. Establishing missional rhythms among the original team members in the spaces where they live, work, recreate, and study, sets the pace for a healthy culture. Most churches use the phrase "involved in ministry" only in the context of volunteerism for official church programs (without most of which the worship service cannot function). However, developing a ministry presence among a particular group does not exclusively happen in organized ministries but in identifying and celebrating intentionality in everyday life as being "involved in ministry." One of several ways to establish this environment is to create new metrics around church engagement. For example, on a weekly basis the number of intentional discipling relationships going on between the church's members and non-members—rather than how many people attend a program called worship—is a much greater measurement of missional impact and capacity. Stated simply, this elevation of mission in everyday life must disrupt the prevailing paradigms of church planting, leadership competencies, and how the affirmation and celebration of mission helps establish a multiplication DNA.

As the common adage says, "The goal of a new church is to become a mother church, not a mega church" (unknown). In addition, given the ways in which church as a living temple can integrate biblical reflection

and praxis, the limiting factor in urban areas can become the number of leaders rather than the number of dollars that a new church can raise.

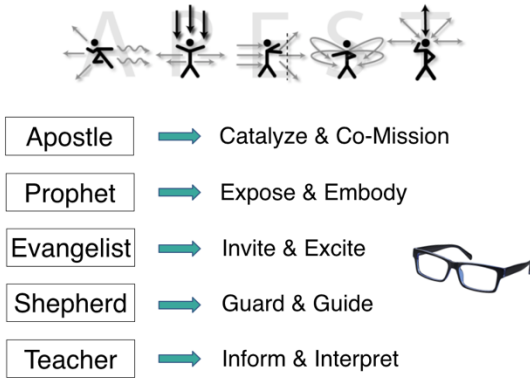
From Performers to Equippers

Emerging in the late 20th century, the German-coined term, “*Eierlegende Wollmilchsau*” —literally an egg-laying, milk-producing, woolly pig—describes the concept of a single individual or device that can do it all.¹ While googling images of a hybrid animal containing these unique features of a chicken, cow, sheep, and pig might look ideal, it is in fact a myth. In the areas of mission and ministry, a similar idealization is observed as leaders are also expected to be experts and deliver unrealistic results in a variety of functions. The biological fact is that no animal has it all, and the spiritual reality is also that no human leader can do it all. This is particularly relevant for the success of church planting within multifaceted urban contexts. Providentially, because of the resurrection and ascension of Christ, unique aspects of the ministry of Christ have been gifted to the body of Christ to be planted across the diverse and multidimensional cities of the world.

While pneumatology appropriately ranks among the most mysterious of biblical doctrines—and appropriately so due to the uncontainable power and incomprehensible workings of the Holy Spirit (John 3:6-8; Acts 1:8)—the fivefold giftings in Ephesians are a foundational equipping paradigm for planting and growing churches. A central chapter within Paul’s rationale—Ephesians 4—declares that unity in Christ (Eph 4:1-6) through diversity in gifting (Eph 4:7-12) is that which will create maturity in mission (Eph. 4:13-16).

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ . . . we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ. (Eph 4:11-13, 15)

While the overlap between the fivefold “APEST” giftings (apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds/pastors, and teachers) and the traditional spiritual gift passages (Rom 12:3-8; 1 Cor 12; 1 Pet 4:10-11) is outside the scope of this chapter, the uniqueness of the Ephesians 4 framework generates radical applications for mission. In synthesizing J. R. Woodward’s treatment of APEST, five specific functions emerge (as pictured) (Woodward 2012):



A New Pair of Glasses

Reading through the gospel stories, a helpful team-building activity is to discuss how each of the fivefold giftings was perfectly expressed in the person of Jesus Christ. As the resurrected Christ gave these gifts to all believers after his ascension, the body of Christ now reflects the fullness of Christ to the degree it collaboratively carries out all five functions. In contrast to the sociological phenomena called “founder’s trap”—where the passion and function of a movement’s founder is unsuccessfully transmitted after death to the followers—the recapitulation of APEST in the church is the concrete expression of the risen Christ (Hirsch 2017:83), and part of the constellation of missional DNA which Hirsch describes as “apostolic genius” (Hirsch 2016:78-81). Viewed primordially through Old Testament archetypes and throughout Holy Scripture, some go as far as positioning APEST as a Christocentric hermeneutical key to reading the Bible. This set of glasses, although incomplete on its own, offers creative insights into how the fivefold giftings as a system are grounded in God Himself (theology), threaded by God into creation (cosmology), expressed the clearest in Jesus’ perfect life (Christology), made tangible in and through God’s people (ecclesiology), activated by the Holy Spirit (pneumatology), and fulfilled in God’s eternal purposes (missiology and eschatology) (Hirsch 2017:27-28, 60, 61).

Movement, Equilibrium, and Decline

The recovery of APEST in facilitating mission becomes a pressing need when viewed through the historical devolution of the fivefold functions in general Christian mission and that of Seventh-day Adventism. Within the

Christendom adoption of state-based church membership and nationalization of Christianity. the apostolic, prophetic, and evangelistic functions were rendered unnecessary.

And herein, my friends, lies the rub: the historical reduction of ministry down from the fivefold ministry of the New Testament to that of Christendom's twofold function of shepherding and teaching has bequeathed a fatal and degenerative dis-ease into the Body of Christ. The genetic codes have been corrupted. The result is that almost all churches in the West only operate with two of the fivefold functions of Jesus. No wonder we are frustrated, broken, and alienated from each other. We have an autoimmune disease, we are a body divided against ourselves. (Hirsch 2017:13)

The historical removal of the "A-P-E" functions and the fusion of the shepherd and teacher into a single office (the use of "teacher" in Eph 4:11 has no definite article in Greek)—in spite of its theological and exegetical problems (Cole 2014:225)—has become an inherited dysfunction in today's post-reformation Protestantism. The thesis that every multiplication movement in the history of Christian mission functioned strongly in all five APEST giftings then moved towards equilibrium, decline, and sometimes death by elevating the "S-T" (shepherd and teacher) functions alone (Hirsch 2017:100), deserves further study in Seventh-day Adventist history specifically. In early Adventism, the tithe system was developed to fund apostolic and evangelistically oriented church planters while volunteer elders and deacons primarily took charge of existing churches. The rapid growth and role of the "A-P-E" functions are well documented and the eventual shifts whereby "paid clergy" became paid caretakers resulted in a historic low point—at least in North American Adventism. In 1995 the number of churches at the end of the year was less than at the beginning, and it took 122 paid pastors in order to raise up one new church (WagenerSmith 2016:87-92).

While today no one can meet the specific stated characteristic of apostles in the New Testament, and the office of apostle is, in a strict sense, not operable (Allison 2012:205-211), the case can be made that Seventh-day Adventist ministry has instead institutionalized or at least programmatized APEST gifting. Today—in spite of the fact that the Greek term for pastor/shepherd (*poimen*) was never a biblical office and is only used once in the entire New Testament to describe a physical human being (Eph 4:11), we have enshrined the title on all paid leaders in a local church—lead pastor, administrative pastor, children's pastor, music ministry pastor, media pastor, etc. The primary domain for teaching is our schools and universities, the apostolic is primarily expressed through

mission agencies, the prophetic though the life and writings of Ellen White, and the evangelistic typically through our supporting ministries and large-scale evangelism platforms.³ In order to avoid the multiple pitfalls of strict cessationism with its discounted version of the Holy Spirit, the extraction and institutionalization of the “A-P-E” gifts out of the local church, and the hazards of identifying the giftings as strict offices, the following recommendations are given.

Implications of Ephesians 4 as an Equipping Paradigm

To plant a movement, not merely a church, every believer must see themselves as an equipper. This is not only pragmatic, but is also exegetically and contextually supported. The setting for APEST is what is given “to each one of us,” as Christ gave gifts to “men” (Eph 4:7-8, 11). “The literal word is *anthropos*, which means human beings as a whole (including both men and women). So, from the very beginning, Paul is *ordaining* the entire body of Christ into the work of ministry. Add to this the truth that recipients of this letter included slaves, women, and people of different races (Eph 2:11ff, 5). These were ordinary people, not a group of ordained leaders” (Hirsch and Catchim 2012:26). Therefore, Paul’s statement in Ephesians 4:11 that Christ gave “some as apostles, and as prophets, and as evangelists, and as pastors and teachers” is not evidence of a “clergy-laity” divide but rather the indication that no one person is an *Eierlegende Wollmilchsau* who has it all. In addition, since the purpose of APEST is to equip the body towards maturity in mission, if you are a believer then you are an equipper of ministry and not merely a performer. This understanding transforms Ephesians 4 from a leadership text into a ministry text. If every believer has the capacity to equip, then the question arises, “Why pay anyone to lead?” One of the pieces to a biblical justification of this is that there are those who particularly excel at equipping. In order to empower ordinary believers to develop a church planting culture, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, particularly in the West, needs to stop hiring performers and start hiring equippers.

A second practical application of APEST for urban church planting is building teams and making disciples. While the available APEST assessments and inventories—like any tools—should be used to start conversations and not create self-fulfilling prophecies, the author has found it effective for members of church planting teams to understand their APEST profiles. The purpose is three-fold: self-awareness of each member’s gifting to leverage their unique contributions, prayer for and recruiting of team members with different giftings to create a multifaceted mission (i.e., a strong evangelist looking to intentionally identify and empower

a gifted shepherd to develop a system of nurture), and working contextually in the initial assessment and ministry design of a new church. In other words, assessing what the apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, shepherding, and teaching response of the church should be given the unique makeup of a particular urban space or people group. Since the planting of new churches facilitates disciple making, the education, assessment, and implementation of APEST functions is a critical component in discipleship. Follow-up coaching for new disciples should include both how to function best in organized ways (official church ministries) and in organic ways (everyday life). Regarding organized ministries, special attention must be given to avoid replicating the institutionalism of the fivefold giftings by placing individuals into silo ministries. Rather, affirm and value how different giftings can reflect the fullness of Christ (i.e., shepherds may drift towards a hospitality team and go deep with those they already know, whereas a winsome evangelist intentionally ignores deep friendships to welcome a total stranger). Regarding organic ways, as a prophetically oriented disciple serves together with the local community, and as a family generates interest in the values and identity of the church plant, they can relationally connect that family with another disciple gifted in teaching. Whether through educating and affirming the fivefold functions within every believer, building healthy teams, assessing and responding to the community, designing a holistic preaching calendar, or ensuring major decisions are bathed in prayer and their impact considered from all five angles, APEST as a biblical framework aids in developing an equipping DNA for mission.

From Affinity to Diversity

Due to multiple factors including immigration, gentrification, and rural-to-urban relocation, cities are increasingly diverse population centers. A movement of new churches must be planted with the capacity to make disciples among such a range of differences including diversity of economics, diversity of thought and politics, diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews, and diversity of ethnicity. While much can be said about this shift among urban areas as well as Christian believers in general across continents (WagenerSmith 2016: App F), it is important to ground the planting of diverse churches as a response to biblical teaching, not merely shifting demographics or political correctness. In the global fulfillment of the great commission, within the setting of the three angel's messages, Seventh-day Adventism is prophetically positioned for a movement of new churches as a foretaste of John's heavenly vision of the bride of Christ:

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations. . . . And I saw another angel flying in midheaven, having an eternal gospel to preach to those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people. . . . After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the lamb. (Matt 28:19-20; Rev 14:6, 7:9)

The choosing of Abraham’s descendants as a vehicle of blessing to the world was never compatible with an exclusive and ethnocentric nation. The prophet Isaiah, in one of a number of key Old Testament passages, which also prefigures Revelation 7, relates this diverse design for the people of God:

“The time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and see my glory. I will set a sign among them and will send survivors from them to the nations: . . . and they will declare my glory among the nations. Then they shall bring all your brethren from all the nations as a grain offering to the Lord . . . on my holy mountain Jerusalem,” says the Lord. (Isa 66:18-20)

Contrary to the assumption that the multiethnic imagination was developed in the New Testament, Stetzer and Im suggest, “God was actually concerned with all cultures from the moment he created the first one” (2016:102).

In the New Testament, the vision for God’s Kingdom as a multiethnic community was envisioned by Christ. At the end of his earthly ministry, after praying to the Father for himself (John 17:1-5) and on behalf of the disciples (vv. 6-19), he prays for all future believers (John vv. 20-23). Three times he prayed specifically that they would “be one” (v. 21), “be one” (v. 22), and be “perfected in unity” (v. 23), so that the world may believe in Jesus and know that God loves them (v. 23). In John 17:21 and 23, the English “so that” forms a *hina* clause in Greek (‘if x happens, then y will be the result’) (DeYmaz 2007:9). In other words, Jesus is saying that there is no guarantee future believers will become one. But if they do, two things will result: people throughout the world will believe Jesus is the Messiah, and respond to God’s love.

Having been envisioned by Christ, the first multiethnic church was demonstrated at Antioch. Broadly speaking it was Antioch—not Jerusalem—that became the prime New Testament example of a missional church plant and missionary base (WagenerSmith 2016:106-111). Whereas Jerusalem was financially generous internally among its members (Acts 2:44-45), Antioch was financially generous externally as the first church

to give an external mission offering (Acts 11:27-30). While the Jerusalem church grew by addition, keeping its best leaders (Acts 1:8; 8:1), the Antioch church grew by multiplication and intentionally sent its best leaders (Acts 13:2-4). And—as a demonstration of the functional shift from affinity to diversity—in Antioch, the “followers of the way” (Acts 9:1-2, 19:9, 23, 22:4,14, 24:22) were given the name “Christians” (Acts 11:26) as the first fully integrated Jewish-Gentile community. One of the reasons the church at Antioch cared about all nations was because its five-person leadership team listed in Acts 13:1 was composed of all nations: two Africans (Simeon from Niger and Lucius of Cyrene), one European (Paul from Asia Minor), a Middle Easterner (Manaen from Judea) and an Islander (Barnabus from Cyprus).

While Luke specifically mentions the cultural background of the Antiochan leaders, APEST gifting was also clearly in play. Paul self-identifies as an “apostle” in the opening to all of his letters except those he co-authored (Philippians, 1 and II Thessalonians, and Philemon), Barnabus functioned in a critical shepherding role as a “son of encouragement” (Acts 4:36), and the text identifies key “prophets and teachers” both in the leadership and the church at large (Acts 13:1). Certainly, the biblical marks of a diverse mission team are observed not only in diversity of ethnicity but also in diversity of function. Both-and not either-or.

The multiethnic church is envisioned by Christ, demonstrated in Antioch, and prescribed in principle through Ephesians (DeYmaz 2007:27-370). In Ephesians 1, all believers (Jews and Gentiles) are part of one family called to demonstrate unity for all (vv. 15-16). In chapter two, Paul argues that through Christ’s removal of the “dividing wall of hostility,” both Jews and Gentiles now form one new group (vv. 12-16). In chapter three, while praying for the Ephesians (vv. 3:1, 14-19), Paul establishes the “mystery of Christ” (v. 4) not as a generic reference to the death and resurrection of Jesus but rather the new reality “that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (v. 6). This “mystery of Christ” (see also Col 1:24-27) was central to Paul’s ministry, and identified as the very reason behind his imprisonment (Eph 6:19-20; Col 4:3). The second half of Ephesians is the practical outworking of such ethnic unity in the mission and ministry of the church. Believers are to “live a life worthy of the calling they have received” (Eph 4:1), a diverse and integrated community as a powerful witness to the “mystery of Christ.” While this unity was commended by Paul in his letter to the Ephesus in the early AD 60s, a few decades later Jesus’ rebuked the Ephesians for having left their “first love” (Rev 2:2-5). The comparison between Revelation 2:2-3 and Ephesians 1:15 is striking: in both passages the Ephesians are commended for their faith and in both their love is mentioned, whereas in Ephesians they loved “all the

saints” and Revelation simply states they left their first love. The biblical picture of God’s love for all people, as demonstrated in planting diverse Christian communities, is a key ingredient for credibility and evangelistic capacity. “I believe the homogeneous church will increasingly struggle in the twenty-first century with credibility, that is, in proclaiming a message of God’s love for all people from an environment in which a love for *all* people cannot otherwise be observed” (DeYmaz 2007:14).

Implications of the Shift—Affinity to Diversity

The practical outworking of the Bible’s multiethnic vision for mission has been significantly shaped by the pervasive notion of the “homogeneous unit principle” in the modern era. Developed by Donald McGavran primarily through field research in India’s caste system during the 1930s, it was observed that new churches grew fastest when the fewest barriers must be crossed by new believers. McGavran stated that people “like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers” and then after conversion they would grow to reach out to different ethnicities and cultures (1990:163) In the late 1970s McGavran issued a prophetic caution relevant to our age which, particularly in the West, normalized attractional church growth methods and the minimized the cross-cultural realities of being a disciple of Christ. “Do, I beg of you, think of it primarily as a missionary and evangelistic principle . . . [for] there is a danger that congregations . . . become exclusive, arrogant, and racist. That danger must be resolutely combated.” (McIntosh 2015) While being clear on who a new church is called to reach is essential, the “who” is radically changing in urban areas leading some practitioners to develop heterogeneous churches that also contain homogeneous cells targeting specific people groups within a larger diverse body (see DeYmaz n.d.).

Circumstances alter cases. If planting for the majority culture in a homogeneous rural location—even if a separate ministry is launched to serve a small minority—the expectation of a multiethnic church is not realistic. If planting for an unreached people group that requires a mother tongue other than the majority language—even if other ethnicities are engaged in sponsoring and supporting the new work—it likewise will be and stay a mono-ethnic plant, particularly if failing to adapt its language and methodologies to the 2nd and 3rd generations. However, given the changing distribution of Christian believers across continents (WagenerSmith 2016: App. F) and the fact that in countries such as the United States the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the most racially diverse religious group (Lipka 2015), intentional design must be given to new urban church plants as a reflection of unity. This can be done by starting

with diverse leadership teams, placing themselves geographically at the intersection of ethnic and socio-ethnic boundaries, and navigating tension that will arise through consistent visioning and regular conversations (see DeYmaz and Li).

While the fact of human preference and affinity is a sociological statement not a soteriological judgment, the overarching angle of Adventist missiology as a remnant group to uniquely participate in God's redemption of all nations radically challenges the long-term evangelistic wisdom of planting homogeneous churches within the increasingly heterogeneous demographics of the world's urban centers. Motivated by God's mission and sustained by his Spirit, special consideration must be given to diversity—not as the goal of the Church but the means through which the Lord reconciles all people to himself.

Conclusion

Today's unprecedented demographic and cultural shifts in urban areas offers the greatest challenge and opportunity for Adventist mission. Given the inseparable link between the return of Christ and the Church's apostolic commission, a global message requires the worldwide multiplication of churches among unentered urban areas and people groups. Within this great work, the deliberate integration between theology and practice plays a critical role in Adventist church planting as it shifts the focus from places to people, from performing to equipping, and from affinity to diversity.

Notes

¹The New Testament consistently connects the second coming of Christ with the global task of disciple-making and witness to all people groups and places. Some examples include: the signs of the second coming with the parables of readiness and engagement with the world (Matt 24-25), the "end of the age" coupled with disciple-making of all people groups (Matt 28:18-20), the ascension promise of Jesus' return and global witnessing to every place on earth (Acts 1:8-11), resurrection at the second coming and full commitment to the work of the Lord (1 Cor 15:51-58), the global proclamation of the gospel with the harvesting of the earth (Rev 14:6-40), etc.

²See www.wikipedia.org, www.dw.com/en/eierlegende-wollmilchsau/a-6616972, and other online articles.

³While the cultural expectations for strong shepherds is particularly pronounced in Western Adventism, different regions and cultures within the Adventist Church—while inheritors of the term pastor for a congregation or district leader—do place greater expectations and accountabilities (regardless of the motivations) around evangelistic and apostolic functions.

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Anthony WagenerSmith is associate director at the North American Division Evangelism Institute, and assistant professor of Christian Ministry at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary. Previously he served for many years pastoring and planting churches in Florida. He and his wife Lianro have two children, Levi and Sage.