

EMBRACING THE CITY:
A BRIEF SURVEY OF THE NORTH AMERICAN MISSION BOARD'S
ENGAGEMENT OF AMERICA'S URBAN CENTERS

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The twenty-first century church faces an increasingly urbanized world. In 2007, for the first time in history, more people worldwide lived in cities than in rural areas.¹ The United Nations anticipates that the global urban population will double to 6.4 billion by 2050. Today, over four hundred cities have populations exceeding one million persons. Nineteen cities worldwide have populations over ten million.² As evangelical believers, churches, and denominations accept the challenge to take the gospel to cities, they encounter a host of difficulties, not the least of which is the task of contextualizing the good news and planting churches in rapidly changing contexts.

While Southern Baptists have historically been a rural and small town denomination, the Convention has been engaged in urban mission since its formation in 1845. One of the earliest commissions of the Domestic Mission Board (now the North American Mission Board) was to engage the great city of New Orleans. By the Civil War, Southern Baptists were actively working in Richmond, Augusta, and Montgomery. "Even at this early date," wrote one historian of Southern Baptist home missions, "a Convention action spoke of the cities as 'the great centers of influence.'"³ Southern Baptist urban mission has expanded ever since.

¹Brad Smith, *City Signals: Principles and Practices for Ministering in Today's Global Communities* (Birmingham, AL: New Hope Publishers, 2008), 38.

²Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, *World Population Prospects: The 2006 Revision and World Urbanization Prospects: The 2007 Revision* [on-line]; available at <http://esa.un.org/unup>; Internet.

³Arthur B. Rutledge, *Mission to America: A Century and a Quarter of Southern Baptist Home Missions* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969), 26.

The purpose of this paper is to survey Southern Baptist mission engagement of North American urban centers, focusing primarily on the latter half of the twentieth century and ending with the decade-long “Strategic Focus Cities” initiative (SFC). Although this survey will be primarily historical, the final section of the paper will briefly address common features of city mission across various programs as well as lessons learned for future denominational work in urban contexts. To set the stage for a discussion of modern urban mission, one must begin with a longer view.

The City and the Mission of God

Harvie Conn and Manuel Ortiz identified four great waves of urban development throughout history. The first city recorded in the Scriptures was Enoch, probably built by Cain and named after his son (Gen 4:17). After the Flood, the descendents of Noah built the great cities of the ancient world, including Nineveh, Sodom, and Gomorrah, as recorded in Genesis 10. Later, “as people migrated from the east,” they settled and declared, “Come, let us build for ourselves a city . . .” (Gen 11:2,4 ESV). These “shrine city-states” were the beginning of the urban development of Mesopotamia and are the forbears of all urban history.⁴

While Nineveh, Babylon, Sodom, and Gomorrah would come to represent all the evil associated with cities, Jerusalem became the image of God’s urban mission in the world.⁵ In contrast to Babel, Jerusalem, home of the temple of God, symbolized hope and peace. Other cities provided peace and safety for their citizens. Jerusalem, however, “was to be the ‘joy of the whole earth,’” representing God’s mission of salvation for the nations (Ps 48:2).⁶

⁴Harvie Conn and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 34-35. See also, Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970).

⁵Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, 87-94.

⁶*Ibid.*, 91.

That mission was fulfilled as the gospel spread from Jerusalem after the resurrection of Christ. Greek cities provided the means of communication and commerce, a feature continued in the Roman Empire. Christianity spread by way of cities. “Within twenty years of the crucifixion,” wrote Rodney Stark, “Christianity was transformed from a faith based in rural Galilee, to an urban movement reaching far beyond Palestine.”⁷ Stark joins other historians who recognize that urbanization fostered, or at least aided, the expansion of the Christian faith. The Roman Empire was urban, and Rome, itself, was home to a million people.⁸ While scholars have argued whether or not Paul intentionally used cities in a strategic manner, there is little question that the Great Apostle worked primarily from urban areas.⁹

The second great wave of urban history took place from the fall of the Roman Empire through the Protestant Reformation. The era was characterized by the close relationship between the church and the city as the parish and diocese became the principal political divisions in society.¹⁰ Also notable is the fact that the Reformation was primarily an urban event.¹¹

Colonization and industrialization precipitated the third wave of urbanization. During this period, the United States rose to prominence on the world stage. Cities were important in American history from the very beginning. While the first settlers built small villages

⁷Rodney Stark, *Cities of God: The Real Story of How Christianity Became an Urban Movement and Conquered Rome* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 25.

⁸Ray Bakke, *The Urban Christian: Effective Urban Ministry in Today's Urban World* (Grand Rapids: IVP, 1987), 28.

⁹For opposing viewpoints, see Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* Reprint (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) and Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies, and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008). See also, Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, 140ff.

¹⁰Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, 39.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 42.

surrounded by farms, cities soon provided the security, both physical and financial, that paved the way for tremendous growth. New York was home to 3,900 people in 1690 but grew to twenty-five thousand by 1775. Philadelphia grew ten-fold, from four thousand to forty thousand, in the same period.¹² The Industrial Revolution brought further population growth, especially by way of newly arrived immigrants in the Northeast. One development from this period was a rising anti-urbanism spurred on by conditions in European and American industrial cities. Even as urban churches grew rapidly, some believers determined that cities were the source of social evils and sought to remove themselves into an idyllic country life.¹³

The most rapid period of urban growth in the United States took place between the end of the Civil War and 1920. Over five decades, the urban population grew from just over six million to more than forty-two million. By 1920, a majority of the American population lived in cities.¹⁴ The growth of the Social Gospel movement and the ministries of urban evangelists like D. L. Moody and Billy Sunday continued to emphasize the darker side of cities even as they sought to bring truth (in the case of Moody and Sunday) and justice (in the case of the Social Gospel) to American urban centers.

Conn and Ortiz describe the fourth wave of urban history as a “global explosion.”¹⁵ In North America, the urban population had shifted from 5 percent in 1790 to over 75 percent in 1990.¹⁶ That growth slowed in the second half of the twentieth century even as global urbanization expanded rapidly. In 2000, over 80 percent of the American population lived in

¹²Harvie Conn, *The American City and the Evangelical Church: A Historical Overview* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 17.

¹³Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, 52-63.

¹⁴Conn, *American City and the Evangelical Church*, 49.

¹⁵Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, 64.

¹⁶Conn, *American City and the Evangelical Church*, 76.

metropolitan areas. Of that number, 93 percent lived in urban areas with populations greater than 250,000. More than half lived in cities of larger than one million persons.

With urban growth, social changes came rapidly, forcing the church to keep up with those cultural changes. Conn and Ortiz describe the issue well:

For its first three hundred years beyond the coming of Christ, the church saw the cities as gifts of God, royal routes to the evangelization of the world. Now the picture is not so bright. In the Western world the church moves to the outer edges of the city, fearful of what it perceives as emerging urban patterns. In the worlds of Africa, Asia, and Latin America the cities expand as the population flows toward them, but with notable exceptions, the church feels overwhelmed and moves only slowly to face urban challenges.¹⁷

For Southern Baptists, urbanization presented a challenge that required action. In North America, that action first took the form of evangelism and holistic mission in Southern cities. Soon enough, however, under the leadership of the Home Mission Board and, later, the North American Mission Board (NAMB), Southern Baptists acted on a vision to “embrace” the great American cities for Christ.

Southern Baptists and the City

At its formation, the Board of Domestic Missions (later Home Mission Board) of the Southern Baptist Convention worked primarily in the South. Its field of labor comprised fourteen states with a population of approximately eight million.¹⁸ The aforementioned work in New Orleans was the Board’s sole foray into urban ministry. Years of conflict, leadership problems, and financial difficulties caused slow growth in the home mission work. Baptists in general believed that domestic work was the responsibility of churches and local associations,

¹⁷Conn and Ortiz, *Urban Ministry*, 79.

¹⁸H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 424.

making it difficult for home missionaries to enter new fields and cities.¹⁹ The conflict between denominational and local leadership has proved to be an issue to the present day. In 1857, the Board was working in some fashion in twenty-one cities, including Montgomery, Richmond, Augusta, Georgia, and San Francisco, Sacramento, Oakland, Santa Cruz, and San Ramon Valley in California.²⁰ Existing mission work in the cities ceased at the beginning of the Civil War.

Early Efforts

Changes in the Home Mission Board's mission at the turn of the century increased attention given urban areas. In 1905, the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention instructed the Board's leadership to consider the strengthening of local churches along with its traditional mission work. Rufus Weaver exemplified both the commonly held fear of the city and the growing realization that urban areas offered great opportunities. He wrote a brief pamphlet in 1907 proclaiming that in the city "the forces of righteousness and unrighteousness meet in hand-to-hand combat."²¹ Still, it was not until 1940 that the Board began a serious effort to meet the challenges and needs of Southern cities.²²

In 1941, the Home Mission Board, in partnership with local associations, appointed two men as "city missions secretaries" in Houston and Atlanta. Washington, D. C., and Birmingham were added soon after.²³ Under the authority of those associations, HMB leaders instituted a program of evangelism, church planting, and social ministry. Particular attention was

¹⁹Ibid., 425.

²⁰Rutledge, *Mission to America*, 106; Solomon F. Dowis, "City Missions," in *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists* Vol. I (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1958), 291-92.

²¹Rutledge, *Mission to America*, 106.

²²Dowis, "City Missions," 291-92.

²³Ibid.

given to racial minorities and the poor. Solomon F. Dowis joined the Board's staff as director of city missions programs.²⁴ He later reported that the program's goal was "to meet all the needs of all the people through the enlistment of all the churches."²⁵

Post-war City Missions

By the end of World War II, forty-six associations had joined forces with the HMB in city missions efforts. Urban ministry programs continued to grow, ably led by Dowis as head of the Department of Cooperative Missions.²⁶ In 1955, the City Mission Department of the Home Mission Board published a "City Missions Directory" entitled, *City Missions: Beginning at Jerusalem*.²⁷ The booklet provided a glowing update of the Board's urban mission work over the previous decade.

Opening the booklet, Executive Secretary-Treasurer Courts Redford rejoiced in cooperative efforts between the HMB, state mission boards, and local associations in "developing and promoting a City Mission Program that will meet the ever-increasing needs and ever-enlarging opportunities for mission service in our urban centers."²⁸ He identified four critical factors relating to urban mission. First, Redford celebrated the strength of existing churches in urban areas. According to his statistics, 21 percent of Southern Baptist churches were located in cities. Those churches tallied 49 percent of total Southern Baptist membership, 64 percent of total offerings, and 52 percent of church additions by baptism. Clearly the

²⁴Rutledge, *Mission to America*, 107-08.

²⁵Dowis, "City Missions," 291.

²⁶Rutledge, *Mission to America*, 108.

²⁷Home Mission Board, SBC, *City Missions: Beginning at Jerusalem* (Atlanta: Home Mission Board, SBC, 1955).

²⁸*Ibid.*, 3.

statistics reflect that, in 1955, Southern Baptist urban churches played an important role in Convention life.²⁹

The second key factor in urban mission was the rapid growth of American cities. Redford saw a tremendous opportunity in the growth of the suburbs. Added to that growth was the movement of young people from rural to urban areas. Many of these young people moving to cities were Southern Baptist, and Redford argued that mission work in urban areas was necessary to “conserve” this demographic “for Christian service.”³⁰ Fourth, and finally, HMB leadership recognized that “the cities are now fixing many of the patterns of social, economic, and religious life for all of America.”³¹ The “tried and proven program” of City Missions provided the best way for Southern Baptists to accomplish these goals.

Dowis contributed to the City Missions report by listing the key characteristics of the program. In addition to the ever-present focus on cooperation between local and national entities, the City Missions Program was devoted to evangelistic effort, was church-centered, and was to be carried out by volunteers rather than professional clergy.³² Leland Waters, director of City Missions, added to Dowis’s contribution by listing not only the vital need for urban mission, but also by giving a ten-point description of the City Missions program. Alongside Dowis’s emphasis on evangelism, church planting, and local leadership, Waters demonstrated the necessity of meeting not only the physical needs of the people, but also their spiritual needs. In a listing that foreshadowed some contemporary missiological thinking, Waters listed home fellowships, holistic ministry, and church planting as vital parts of the overall program.³³

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., 4-5.

³³Ibid., 7-8.

Forty-nine superintendants of various City Missions programs reported on the work in their respective cities. All forty-nine represented cities in traditional Southern Baptist fields; none worked in areas outside the South. The men reported a 32 percent increase in the number of Southern Baptist churches over the ten-year period from 1944 to 1954. During that same period, the City Mission program counted a 64 percent increase in church membership, a 406 percent increase in new “chapels” formed,³⁴ a 106 percent increase in baptisms, and a 276 percent growth in financial receipts. All these increases were in line with the ten-year population growth in the reporting cities. Without question, Southern Baptist city missions were growing.³⁵

Rounding out this important report was a list of twelve goals for the following decade. Prepared and adopted by a meeting of all City Missions superintendents, the goals reflected the ten-point program of evangelism, church planting, holistic ministry, and cooperation:

- I. A City Mission Program in every city of the Southern Baptist Convention with a population above 100,000.
- II. A functioning city mission committee for every program, promoting a complete city mission program.
- III. Ten thousand new churches in the cities above 100,000 population.
- IV. Ten thousand churches enlisted in some church-sponsored mission work.
- V. Five hundred permanent mission centers with a complete program.
- VI. Three hundred Good Will centers.
- VII. An institutional program in every city ministering to the spiritual needs of those involved.
- VIII. An adequate program in every city for all minority groups: Negroes, Jews, Deaf, Mexican, Chinese, Japanese, Indians, French, Italians, Russian, Spanish, and Other Groups.
- IX. Specialized programs for social and moral conditions: Broken Home Counseling, Juvenile Delinquency, Military Personnel, Handicapped Groups, Liquor Problems, Gambling, etc.

³⁴“Chapels” were the first stage of a new church plant.

³⁵*City Missions*, 39.

- X. A larger and better promotional program for city missions.
- XI. A closer co-ordination of city mission programs with state mission work.
- XII. A greater emphasis on the church-sponsored principle with volunteer workers.³⁶

This listing was notable not only for its ambitious numerical goals, but also for its awareness of critical social and ministry issues in urban missions. Leaders recognized that, while evangelism is a vital component, Christians are also called to minister to the brokenness and suffering of cities.

The Department of Metropolitan Missions

The next major turning point in the history of Home Mission Board work in urban centers came in 1964 with the formation of the Department of Metropolitan Missions. For a brief period between 1957 and 1961, the Board seemed to leave its earlier strategy focused on “grassroots” leadership and began to provide substantial financial assistance to select urban areas, including cities outside of the South. An allocation of \$600,000 provided for the purchase of property for new church buildings and for pastoral salary support. After the suspension of this “Big Cities Program” in 1962, HMB leadership prepared to restructure the urban programs to meet the needs of a changing country.³⁷

The most drastic change in the structure of the Department of Metropolitan Missions was its relationship to local associations and state conventions. While cooperation with those local entities remained important, HMB no longer required that associations vote to join the City Missions Program. Instead, the population of the metropolitan area determined the relationship between local and national leadership. If the city had over fifty thousand in population, it fell under metropolitan missions.³⁸

³⁶Ibid., 5.

³⁷Rutledge, *Mission to America*, 109.

³⁸Ibid.

The 1966 meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention authorized twelve areas of work for the Home Mission Board. According to Corresponding Secretary Arthur Rutledge, the Department of Metropolitan Mission was freed “to major on working with metropolitan associations in developing strategies and planning programs for the strengthening of the Christian witness throughout metropolitan America.”³⁹ The program statement adopted by the Convention listed “simultaneous evangelism projects, chaplaincy ministries, church loans, establishment of new churches, associational administration, language missions, work with National Baptists, Christian social ministries, and work related to nonevangelicals [sic]” as areas of responsibility.⁴⁰ Most encouraging was one of the guidelines adopted by the Board in the same year:

The urban centers of the United States shall receive the major thrust of the Home Mission Board. With 70 percent of the population now in urban centers and with the prediction that 90 percent of the population will be in urban centers by A.D. 2000, it seems necessary that urban missions be given priority. Urban areas are the centers of political, economic, educational, and moral influence.⁴¹

In response to the new guidelines, the decade of the 1970s saw an increased emphasis on mission in North America’s urban centers. Culminating with the Mega Focus Cities program, the growth of the Department of Metropolitan Missions prepared the way for the most ambitious city reaching program in Southern Baptist history.

From “Big Cities” to “Key Cities” to “Mega Focus Cities”

Beginning in the mid-1960s, the Home Mission Board participated in a series of studies and initiatives that shaped the next three decades of the agency’s urban mission work. A statistical decline in urban church membership and attendance led to a study by Southern

³⁹Ibid., 110.

⁴⁰Ibid., 259-60.

⁴¹Ibid., 261.

Seminary professor G. Willis Bennett on the state of transitional churches, those congregations located in changing areas of American cities.⁴² The continuing needs of such churches fostered another project titled, “Metro Churches in Crisis,” led by the Church Program Organization Subgroup of the Church Program Coordination Committee. The project committee studied churches in urban areas and made recommendations on topics as diverse as contextualization, culture, evangelism, change, theological issues, and church planting.⁴³ Four years later, B. Carlisle Driggers, an HMB consultant, published *Models of Metropolitan Ministry*, a survey of twenty churches in urban contexts reflecting how those congregations dealt with transition.⁴⁴

Warren Rust became leader of a new HMB initiative, “Key Cities,” in 1976. Over a three-year period, Key Cities attempted to develop mission work in twenty-five urban areas simultaneously. The effort was later described as “a trial-and-error period which registered minimal results in its entirety but positive results in particular cities.”⁴⁵ While Key Cities was not as successful as earlier and later efforts, leaders of the Department of Metropolitan Missions learned important lessons for the future.

Don E. Hammer followed Rust as department director in 1978 and discontinued the Key Cities program.⁴⁶ The following year, he and James W. Nelson, director of the HMB’s

⁴²G. Willis Bennett, *Confronting a Crisis: A Depth Study of Southern Baptist Churches in Metropolitan Transitional Areas* (Atlanta: Home Mission Board, SBC, 1967).

⁴³E. Warren Rust, chairman, “Project Report: ‘Metro Churches in Crisis,’” (Church Program Organization Group of the Church Program Coordination Subcommittee, Sept 30, 1975, typewritten).

⁴⁴B. Carlisle Driggers, *Models of Metropolitan Ministry: How Twenty Churches are Ministering Successfully in Areas of Rapid Change* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1979).

⁴⁵Jere Allen, “The Mega Focus Cities Program,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 30, no. 1 (Jan 1995), 23-24.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 25.

Associational Missions Division, published *Future Talk for Southern Baptists*, outlining the needs of North America at the end of the twentieth century.⁴⁷ In that work, Hammer and Nelson laid the foundation for a “bold mission strategy” looking to the year 2000. Loaded with statistics reflecting significant changes in the American population, the book cast a vision for extended evangelistic efforts that included the entire North American population.

Hammer, along with Jere Allen and George W. Bullard, Jr., envisioned a new initiative that would impact American cities for Christ while avoiding the challenges encountered by the Key Cities program. Key Cities, they argued, had tried to do too much at one time with too little input from local associations and other denominational entities.⁴⁸ The new program would have a renewed focus on local associations and contextualized strategy.

Hammer, Allen, and Bullard detailed the need for a new initiative in a 1982 article published by the newly formed Center for Urban Church Studies.⁴⁹ First, in keeping with lessons learned during Key Cities, Hammer argued that “the local association or conference is the best base for building mission strategy to penetrate the target groups of people in . . . larger metropolitan areas.”⁵⁰ The complex social systems of urban areas required the contribution of

⁴⁷Don E. Hammer and James W. Nelson, *Future Talk for Southern Baptists* (Atlanta: Home Mission Board, SBC, 1979).

⁴⁸Allen, “Mega Focus Cities,” 25.

⁴⁹Don E. Hammer, Jere Allen, and George W. Bullard, Jr., “Urban Strategy Through Cooperative Efforts,” in Larry L. Rose and C. Kirk Hadaway, eds., *The Urban Challenge: Reaching America’s Cities with the Gospel* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1982). *The Urban Challenge* was one of five books published between 1981 and 1985 by the Center for Urban Church Studies. Led by Larry Rose, the Center was a cooperative effort between the Baptist Sunday School Board, the Brotherhood Commission, the Woman’s Missionary Union, and the six Southern Baptist Seminaries. Its purpose was “to conduct research and compile information in order to gain greater understanding of how the gospel can most effectively be shared in the urban areas of the world.” A companion to this work was *An Urban World*, also edited by Rose and Hadaway, focused on global urban mission. Larry L. Rose and C. Kirk Hadaway, eds., *An Urban World: Churches Face the Future* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1984), 5.

⁵⁰Hammer, Allen, and Bullard, “Urban Strategy,” 148.

local and national leaders who would develop a comprehensive strategy. Southern Baptists in general were unprepared for urban mission, having only 10 percent of Southern Baptist churches in “megalopolitan” areas.⁵¹ Because of these vast cultural differences, partnership was imperative.

Another important consideration in the formation of Mega Focus Cities was the need for redistribution of resources. A successful urban initiative required the support of more affluent suburban and small town churches. Again, cooperation was key because it was impossible for single congregations alone to reach the great cities of North America. Financial resources, coupled with volunteers from supporting churches, would be vital to success.⁵²

In response to these needs, Hammer and his team developed a series of “strategy assumptions” that would guide the Mega Cities Focus program. First, they contended that no single strategy could apply to all contexts. Each focus city would operate differently as a reflection of its unique environment. As a result, “grassroots” leadership was a foundational issue. Models would be “locally-owned, custom-made, and open-ended.”⁵³ To determine an appropriate contextualized strategy, teams would engage in intensive research in the cities in order to discover “target groups” and the work of other denominations and groups in the area. Strategies would take the entire city into account, not the inner city nor the suburbs alone.⁵⁴

On a more philosophical level, the Mega Focus Cities strategy would have to be “prophetic,” avoid “business as usual,” and involve “kingdom dreams.” “There must be

⁵¹Ibid., 149. “Megalopolitan” areas were defined as urban areas of over one million people. Earlier statistics often mentioned only “cities.”

⁵²Ibid., 150-51.

⁵³Ibid., 151.

⁵⁴Ibid., 152.

something unique and even radical about successful metropolitan strategies,” argued the team.⁵⁵ Finally, within the context of these “kingdom dreams,” focus strategies would consider leadership development of pastors and leaders, including the necessity of long tenure. In order to have a fruitful ministry in an urban context, pastors had to commit long-term to work in their communities.

Mega Focus Cities launched its initial pilot projects in 1981 in New York and Miami, both of which had been planned for the final year of Key Cities.⁵⁶ The new strategy involved a three-year plan beginning with a full year of negotiation with local associations and leadership. After a process of orientation, the Department of Metropolitan Missions would help local leaders develop a contextualized strategy plan, and then provide resources to enact that plan in the second year. Financial and people resources came from local, state, and national agencies, including churches. The third year of the process would focus on implementation.⁵⁷ As originally designed, the initiative would engage the fifty largest cities in the United States over ten years.⁵⁸

The launch of Mega Focus Cities coincided with the publication of *Urban Heartbeat*, a book describing urban mission and church planting work in five different North American cities. The introduction featured interviews with Hammer, Allen, Bullard, and others involved with both Key Cities and Mega Focus Cities. Later chapters described work in Miami, New Orleans, Oklahoma City, and Chicago, as well as a new church plant in Orange County, California, led by an unknown church planter named Rick Warren. *Urban Heartbeat* smoothed

⁵⁵Ibid., 153.

⁵⁶Allen, “Mega Focus Cities,” 26.

⁵⁷Hammer, Allen, and Bullard, “Urban Strategy,” 154-55.

⁵⁸Allen, “Mega Focus Cities,” 26.

the transition between Key Cities and Mega Focus Cities by reminding readers of the HMB's ongoing work in urban centers.⁵⁹

Ongoing evaluation by the Mega Focus Cities team led to a series of adjustments in the overall program strategy. The HMB leadership developed criteria for associations participating in the initiative. They divided cities into three classes based on population and provided for longer preparation and implementation phases in larger cities. Overall, the strategy was extended to an eight-year plan including three years of planning and five years of implementation. A simplified plan was developed, comprised of four phases of preparation, planning, resource development, and implementation.⁶⁰

According to Jere Allen, Mega Focus Cities was generally successful in its efforts to engage cities. After two years, cities involved in the initiative were ahead of the Convention in the number of new churches, resident members, and Sunday School enrollment, but slightly lower in baptisms.⁶¹ In 1995, the number of new churches in the largest cities was growing by approximately 2 percent compared to .5 percent in the Convention at large.⁶²

In spite of these victories, major changes were on the horizon for the Home Mission Board and its urban work in North America. The Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention led to a massive restructuring of Convention agencies. In 1995, the sesquicentennial of the formation of the Home Mission Board, the "Covenant for a New Century" combined the work of the missions agency, the Brotherhood Commission, and the Radio and Television Commission into one new entity, the North American Mission Board.

⁵⁹David Wilkinson and Paul Obregon, *Urban Heartbeat: The Human Touch in Metropolitan Missions* (Atlanta: Home Mission Board, SBC, 1981).

⁶⁰Allen, "Mega Focus Cities," 29-30.

⁶¹Ibid., 27.

⁶²Ibid., 30.

Two years later, in 1997, that merger finally took place, and a new era in Southern Baptist urban engagement began.

Strategic Focus Cities

Immediately following the Convention's decision to form the North American Mission Board, an Implementation Task Force began considering the primary emphases of the new entity. The evangelization of large cities became one of four primary tasks.⁶³ Under the leadership of Board President Robert Reccord, who coined the phrase, "Strategic Focus Cities" was born.⁶⁴ Doug Metzger, a former California Pastor and a Home Mission Board staff member for almost four years, was named the first director in September 1997.⁶⁵

A Strategic Focus Cities (SFC) task force began work immediately on a broad strategy plan for engaging urban areas outside of traditional Southern Baptist Convention territory. Metzger has pointed out that the initiative "was initially established as a high impact, desert storm approach to touch a city."⁶⁶ The idea was that a quick and focused effort would produce significant results. Eventually, SFC established a series of partnerships between NAMB and local associations in order to "facilitate a sustained movement of God in and through the Body of Christ in major North American Cities resulting in spiritual transformation through prayer, evangelism, and church planting."⁶⁷ These last three elements of the SFC purpose statement,

⁶³Doug Metzger, *Strategic Focus Cities (SFC) Manual* (Alpharetta, GA: North American Mission Board, 2002), 1.

⁶⁴Rich Carney, telephone interview by author, 16 October 2008, handwritten notes.

⁶⁵Metzger, *SFC Manual*, 1; Doug Metzger, telephone interview by the author, 22 October 2008, handwritten notes.

⁶⁶Doug Metzger, "A Position Paper on Strategic Focus Cities," paper presented to the North American Mission Board, Alpharetta, GA, 2 December 2002, 1.

⁶⁷Metzger, *SFC Manual*, 3.

along with collegiate and student ministries, were considered the “anchors” and primary assignment of the SFC team.

Metzger and his colleagues had a vision of reaching forty significant cities by 2020. The initiative would accomplish that task by launching projects in two cities each year beginning in 1998. The original plan provided for two years of preparation in a city, one year of implementation, and two years of follow-up.⁶⁸ The preparation phase would involve evaluation of each city and current work and preparation of a specific and contextualized plan for a holistic ministry to the entire city. Early leaders recognized that, while several different models for city-reaching existed, they all focused on one element such as prayer, community building and renewal, justice ministries, and the like. SFC, however, attempted to join all of those strategies together into one.⁶⁹

As the foundation for strategic partnerships, the SFC team developed a list of eight “core values” intended to keep the team and its partners focused on the task of urban impact. The first value was prayer.⁷⁰ Metzger recognized early in the process the vital importance of prayer, calling it “our propelling priority.”⁷¹ The second core value was “intentionality,” followed by “spiritual depth,” “teamwork,” and “kingdom focus.” “Effectiveness,” “grassroots ownership,” and “servant leadership” rounded out the list.⁷² Clearly, the SFC team valued work that would have a spiritual impact on the city, its churches, and its people. In order to achieve that goal, partners had to place a high value on working with others for the impact of the

⁶⁸Metzger, interview.

⁶⁹Carney, interview.

⁷⁰Metzger, *SFC Manual*, 4.

⁷¹Metzger, interview.

⁷²Metzger, *SFC Manual*, 4.

Kingdom. The SFC team, in turn, would serve its partners, acknowledging the local leadership as the primary source of strategy and direction.

At the meeting of the Executive Board of the Southern Baptist Convention in September, 1998, Convention President Paige Patterson and NAMB President Bob Reccord encouraged pastors and leaders to consider the great needs of American cities. Patterson called on Southern Baptists to “bend our backs to the job of getting the gospel of Jesus Christ to Nineveh, to New York, to Chicago, to Philadelphia, to Cleveland.”⁷³ Reccord affirmed Patterson’s call to action, announcing the formation of a strategy to reach the fifty largest cities of the nation. “The effort to share the gospel in our largest cities,” he proclaimed, “will be a personal priority for me and for our agency.”⁷⁴ Reccord announced that Phoenix and Chicago would be the first Strategic Focus Cities.

Cities chosen for the initiative would receive \$2.5 million in funding from NAMB and its partners over the five-year process, as well as office space and staffing. Each city recruited thousands of volunteers to engage the city in mission projects during the implementation year.⁷⁵ Time was short for the planning phase in these two initial cities. While most cities would have two years for initial planning, Chicago and Phoenix had only one and a half years. Rich Carney, who has been involved in SFC for its entire history, acknowledges that “there was not a lot of guidance at first.”⁷⁶ Metzger remembers that Carney compared the early

⁷³Art Toalston, “Paige Patterson Urges SBC Thrust to Evangelize Nation’s Major Cities,” *Baptist Press*, 22 Sept 1998, [on-line]; available at <http://www.bpnews.org/bpnews.asp?id=2770>; Internet.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Ibid.; Ferrell Foster, “Phoenix to Get Special Focus in 2000, Arizona Baptists Told,” *Baptist Press*, 17 Nov 1998 [on-line]; available at <http://www.bpnews.org/bpnews.asp?id=4950>; Internet.

⁷⁶Carney, interview.

years of SFC to a “747 that had never flown.” The problem was not the airplane or its ability to fly, but the “potholes in the runway.”⁷⁷

Even as the Phoenix and Chicago teams entered their planning years, the SFC leadership began considering future cities. They developed a pool of potential cities, including Boston, Cleveland, Detroit, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Miami, Minneapolis/St. Paul, New York, Philadelphia, San Diego, San Francisco/Oakland, Seattle/Tacoma, Washington/Baltimore, Montréal and Toronto.⁷⁸ At the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in June 1999, where the primary theme was mission to the cities, NAMB announced Boston and Las Vegas as the second pair of focus cities with implementation planned for 2001. Philadelphia and Seattle would follow in 2002.⁷⁹

During the planning process for Phoenix and Chicago, SFC leadership noticed that one of the serious “potholes” in the system for strategic development was relationships. In a report to NAMB leadership, Metzger pointed out that “the need to build relationships that will foster effective partnerships received little to no discussion in the early deliberations of the task force.”⁸⁰ Leaders seemed to assume that relationships between churches, associations, and the national agencies were good – an assumption that proved untrue. The Chicago partnership involved four different local associations and a variety of leaders.⁸¹ In Phoenix, three

⁷⁷Metzger, interview.

⁷⁸Metzger, *SFC Manual*, 5.

⁷⁹Art Toalston, “SBC to Bolster Cooperative Program, City Outreach; Clinton Still an Issue,” *Baptist Press*, 17 June 1999 [on-line]; available at <http://www.bpnews.org/bpnews.asp?id=796>; Internet; James Dotson, “The Great Gospel for the Big Cities,” *SBC Life*, April 1999 [on-line]; available at <http://www.sbclife.org/articles/1999/04/sla1.asp>; Internet.

⁸⁰Metzger, “Position Paper,” 1.

⁸¹Metzger, interview.

associations, the Arizona state convention, NAMB, and LifeWay joined local churches in the SFC effort.⁸² The complicated network between churches, agencies, and individuals sometimes caused organizational problems that hindered the overall progress of the project.

In Metzger's report to NAMB leadership, he emphasized that in Chicago and Phoenix, "there has been a huge learning curve that will not end until the end of the five-year process."⁸³ He asked the Board to consider the receptivity of focus cities to the gospel, the vital importance of relationships, and the necessity of long-term partnership that would support ongoing city-reaching efforts.⁸⁴ The result of these adjustments came to be known as the "EMBRACE" process.⁸⁵

EMBRACE⁸⁶ reflected a renewed emphasis on relationships and long-term impact by setting new criteria for city selection and readiness. Future cities would continue to be outside the "Bible belt," but would all have a population of at least one million persons. The system focused on four key areas of preparedness, the first being "spiritual readiness." SFC leadership recognized the reality of spiritual warfare and the importance of spiritual preparation and depth. As Doug Metzger reflected on the first years of SFC, he said he did not "realize how much Satan controlled these cities. We wanted to take them mile by mile, but it was inch by inch."⁸⁷ All

⁸²Ibid.; Ritche Lee Carney, "Developing a Denominational Strategic Plan for Spiritually Impacting a Major Metropolitan Area in North America" (D. Min. project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007), 93.

⁸³Metzger, "Position Paper," 3.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Carney, "Developing a Denominational Strategic Plan," 99.

⁸⁶EMBRACE stood for "Equipping the Saints, Mobilizing churches, Building partnership, Realizing spiritual potential, Advancing Kingdom growth through Church planting and Evangelism. Metzger, *SFC Manual*, 7.

⁸⁷Metzger, *SFC Manual*, 11; Metzger, interview.

new focus cities hosted prayer and spiritual preparation conferences for churches and individuals. Continuing emphasis on prayer and discipleship were equally important.

The second key area of preparedness was “relational readiness.” As mentioned above, strained and fractured relationships had been a problem in the initial focus cities. Partnership between local believers, churches, associations, state conventions, and the national entities required effort and intentionality. At the same time, SFC leadership acknowledged that SFC efforts in a city would fail, or at least be severely weakened, by relational problems, as had been demonstrated in Chicago.⁸⁸

The final two areas of readiness covered strategy and leadership. New cities had to demonstrate adequate leadership on all levels. In addition, all levels had to be involved in the strategy development process through orientation sessions led by SFC leaders and through leadership training.⁸⁹ The ultimate objective of the EMBRACE process was the SFC covenant between local, state, and national leaders.

EMBRACE bore fruit in all of the cities following its implementation. Five years after the initial launch of SFC, Reccord announced that efforts in Chicago, Phoenix, Boston, Las Vegas, Seattle, and Philadelphia had resulted in 23,000 volunteers leading 20,000 people to Christ and starting 174 new churches.⁹⁰ Later cities included Miami, implemented in 2003-04, New York City, implemented in 2004-05, and Cleveland, implemented in 2006-07. Baltimore and San Diego are the current focus cities.⁹¹

⁸⁸Metzger, *SFC Manual*, 12.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁹⁰James Dotson, “NAMB Five Years Later,” *SBC Life* (Sept 2002) [on-line]; available at <http://www.sbclife.org/articles/2002/09/sla1.asp>; Internet.

⁹¹“Strategic Focus Cities,” [on-line]; available at <http://www.namb.net/site/pp.aspx?c=9qKILUOzEpH&b=222475>; Internet.

Evaluation of the SFC initiative is a daunting task. New NAMB President Geoff Hammond has chosen to discontinue SFC after implementation of Baltimore and San Diego, but the program is still very much in progress. The initiative leadership's own analysis is helpful, however, in determining the impact of SFC as well as its place in the history of Southern Baptist mission to the city.

David Howard, the current director of Strategic Focus Cities, argues that while some cities have seen better results than others, all have their successes. Efforts in Phoenix had the longest lasting and strongest impact on Cooperative Program giving, while Philadelphia continues to report strong baptism numbers. New York City saw great success in volunteer mobilization. Howard and Carney agree that Cleveland may have been the best overall experience so far because of strong relationships and leadership.⁹²

In 2004, SFC reported a total of 301 new churches planted in the first seven cities implemented and 47,080 professions of faith. Rich Carney reports that, to date, over four hundred new churches have been planted as a direct result of SFC. Even more significantly, 70 to 80 percent of those church plants survive, a number on par or better than national church plant survivability rates.⁹³ In Phoenix, ten of twenty-eight new churches had from 750 to 1,500 in attendance after seven years.⁹⁴

Not all SFC efforts have been as successful. Chicago and Boston struggled with relationships, while New York efforts had difficulty with local church involvement. This is not to say there was no lasting fruit in these cities. Some associations had difficulty with the large

⁹²David Howard, Telephone Interview by the author, 22 Oct 2008, handwritten notes.

⁹³Carney, interview. A 2007 study by NAMB's Center for Missional Research found that approximately 68 percent of church plants survive after four years. See Ed Stetzer and Phillip Connor, *Church Plant Survivability and Health Study 2007* (Alpharetta, GA: Center for Missional Research, 2007), 13.

⁹⁴Carney, "Developing a Denominational Strategic Plan," 93.

influx of money and personnel resources that came with the SFC initiatives.⁹⁵ In 2003, Vancouver became the first international city to receive SFC support, but the work was turned over to Canadian Baptists after three years because of the slowness of the work in that secular culture. NAMB leaders acknowledged that they were less than prepared for those cultural differences.⁹⁶ A five year plan was not appropriate for the Canadian culture.

Another significant contribution of the SFC initiative is its emphasis on partnership. As this study has shown, issues related to partnerships between national and local entities have always been important, if at times strained. David Howard believes that SFC's greatest contribution, second only to its impact on individual lives and communities with the gospel is that it "gave networks of churches a template to effectively work together."⁹⁷ Through the EMBRACE process, more careful preparation, and the emphasis on relationships between churches, leaders, and entities, he added, "We've cracked the code on missional collaboration in big cities."⁹⁸

Conclusions

The story of Southern Baptist home mission involvement in the urban centers of North America is one of success and growth, but it is also incomplete. As American cities continue to grow, Southern Baptists worry about declines in baptisms, membership, and giving.⁹⁹ Costly

⁹⁵Carney, interview; Howard, interview.

⁹⁶Mickey Noah, "NAMB Transfers 'Vancouver Focus' Campaign to Canadian Conv.," *Baptist Press*, 1 June 2006 [on-line]; available at <http://www.bpnews.org/bpnews.asp?id=23377>; Internet.

⁹⁷Howard, interview.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹"Ranks of Southern Baptists are Still Growing Thinner," *The New York Times*, 25 Apr 2008 [on-line]; available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/25/us/25baptists.html?ref=us>; Internet.

and labor-intensive programs like Mega Focus Cities and Strategic Focus Cities make an impact, but one wonders whether that impact is as great as it could be.

Several common themes weave through the history of Southern Baptist missions involvement in American cities. First is the emphasis on cooperation. Whether one speaks of the sometimes tense relationship between the national boards and the state conventions or of the successful models espoused in later years, the thread of relationship is always found. While Southern Baptists are not always known as peaceful people, perhaps we should consider the importance of being the church Jesus prayed for in John 17, when he asked that the church be united as Father and Son are one. The city-reaching efforts described in this paper do not achieve that goal, but they show that when believers walk together, God is glorified and cities are touched.

A second historical theme seen in the stories of Southern Baptist city-reaching is a constant and growing emphasis on the spiritual and physical needs of the urban centers. One can see, from the earliest Southern Baptist involvement in New Orleans to Paige Patterson's call to reach the cities to the growing emphasis on urban ministry and mission in Convention life today,¹⁰⁰ a rising tide of interest in getting the gospel to cities. This concern is clear in HMB/NAMB efforts, especially in the twentieth century. As awareness of the lostness of American urban centers grew, Southern Baptists responded.

A third theme seen throughout this study is an emphasis on evangelism and church planting without neglecting the social needs of urban dwellers. Southern Baptists have taken

¹⁰⁰Consider not only the NAMB efforts, but also those of the International Mission Board. See also the formation of the Wayne and LeAlice Dehoney Center for Urban Ministry Training at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, the first serious effort of its kind in a Southern Baptist Seminary since the closing of the Center for Urban Church Studies in 1985. See www.urbanministrytraining.org or <http://www.towersonline.net/story.php?grp=towers&id=360>.

seriously the call of the Great Commission to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19-20). At the same time, they have long answered the call to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and care for the poor, the widowed, and the orphaned.

Finally, I am encouraged by the passion that those working in urban centers have for getting the gospel to their neighbors and friends. Although it is difficult to convey that heart in a historical study, my interviews with leaders and my reading of historical studies inspired me in my own ministry. The history of Southern Baptist engagement of the urban context is a stream that stretches back over 150 years. But that stream also stretches into the future and begs for God-called men and women who will seek to minister in the city as faithfully and creatively as their predecessors.

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