

EVANGELISM IN HIGH-RISE HOUSING APARTMENTS

James Y.K. Wong

Rev. Wong, Singapore, is Director of the Church Growth Study Center.

It is generally agreed that in Paul's missionary journeys the city presented a special challenge to him. In his strategy he focused the evangelistic thrust on the cities. There were two chief reasons for doing this. First, as centers of commerce and government, cities exercised a vital function — with their concentration of people — to get the Gospel spread out to the surrounding countryside. Second, Paul found that the urban dwellers within the synagogue community were receptive to the Gospel. These two advantageous factors are found also in many of our twentieth-century urban communities — a concentration of people and their spiritual responsiveness.

The future of cities and housing development

The need for planning to evangelize the urban population is seen in the fact that more and more of the world's people will be living in cities. Contemporary population studies indicate that the trend towards a greater concentration of people living in cities will increase rapidly. Note these statistics:

(i) In 1920, the total population in the world was 1.9 billion. By 1970, the population increased to 3.5 billion. Projecting a modest growth rate, it is estimated that by 2000 A.D. the world population will exceed 6.1 billion. But much of this growth will be in the cities!

(ii) In a United Nations population study ("Growth of the World's Urban and Rural Population, 1920-2000"), the facts of the size, composition, and growth of cities from 1920 to 1960 with a further projection of to 1980 are given.

In 1920, approximately 250 million people were classified as urban dwellers. By 1960, this increased three times, to 750 million. During this period, the rate of urban growth was found to be more rapid in the Third World countries than in the developed nations. For example, by 1960 the urban population increased by five times its 1920 size in Latin America and Africa, more than four times in South Asia, and nearly four times in East Asia (by contrast, the overall increase in Europe is only two-thirds of its 1920 size).

Another fact indicated by this U.N. study is that larger cities (population exceeding 2.5 million) were growing at the rate of 4.8 times from 1920 to 1960, whereas the smaller towns (pop. less than 100,000) increased only by 2.3 times over the same period.

As we think through a strategy of evangelism to penetrate the world with the Gospel, we need to give greater attention to urban evangelism — especially in areas where there is a large concentration of people — as in the vast housing estates with high-rise apartments.

Singapore: a case study of modern housing

The home and its environs is man's greatest opportunity for a satisfying life on earth. Yet, a vast portion of the world's population is still housed in sub-standard and over-crowded dwellings. This lack of adequate and decent housing constitutes one of the greatest hindrances to development in many Third World countries and aggravates all other social and economic problems.

Singapore has been recognized internationally as one of the countries with significant achievement in solving its housing needs. This city also provides an example of the kind of social changes resulting from its extensive high-rise housing development and what bearing these changes would have upon evangelism in an urban community.

Historically, the first government attempt to construct low-cost public housing dates back to 1927 when the Singapore Improvement Trust (S.I.T.) was set up. Between 1927 and 1960, the population grew from 500,000 to over 1.5 million, whereas the total number of public housing units constructed by the S.I.T. in this same period was 23,000. Consequently there was an acute shortage of modern housing in this rapidly growing city.

Singapore's housing revolution started after the present government came into office in 1959. In 1960 the state-owned Housing and Development Board (HDB) was formed to replace the S.I.T. Initially, two five-year plans were formulated. The target of 50,000 units in the first phase (1960-1965) and 60,000 units in the second phase (1965-1970) was reached. Presently about 40 percent of the 2.4 million population are living in these high-rise apartments (many of these soar up to 25-30 stories high). Since 1971, the country has embarked on the third 5-year plan, in which presently at least 30,000 units are built each year. In other words, it will take about four years to achieve the same number of units as constructed during the first ten years. By 1975, it is estimated that 60 percent of the population will dwell in these densely populated housing estates. By 1980 it will increase to 75 percent. Thus eventually three-fourths of the people in Singapore will be "high-risers".

Problems created and the church's response

With so many people living in such close proximity (the size of these housing estates ranges from 20,000 to 200,000 residents), a variety of social and community problems are bound to arise. When thousands of urban slum dwellers and rural squatters are uprooted from familiar surroundings and brought together suddenly, tremendous problems of adjustment exist.

This is where the church can play an important role. Alert to the opportunities, responsible Christian witness and service can be directed to help to bring about healthy social change. The church's function in such a situation is to be sensitive to any social-community problems, and in the name of Christ find positive ways of ministering to the social and spiritual needs of the people.

Such a task must be seen in the light of the fact that the church situated in the midst of these housing estates is presented with exciting possibilities of discipling a large section of the urban population for

Christ. It must seek ways and means to serve the needs of the whole man and thus relate its ministry of witness and service together. Without neglecting its cultural mandate, the church's mission must go beyond the meeting of social needs. The primary task of the church is to be alert to the opportunities of communicating the Gospel of Christ and persuade men, women and children — within the family context — to become followers of Christ and be made responsible members of his church.

Opportunities for evangelism

When people experience rapid social change they are also more open to religious change. Several case studies have been carried out in Singapore among the residents of high-rise housing estates. In a community survey of the "religious orientation" of the people living in high-rise apartments (conducted by the author in 1972), he found that the residents were more responsive to the presentation of the Gospel message during the initial period of settling into a new housing estate. His conclusion was that if churches are planted early enough in new housing estates they will have considerable opportunities to exercise an effective service and witness role among the residents. Evangelism and church planting will be more successful when it is being carried out in these spiritually responsive housing apartment blocks if it is initiated right from the beginning as the residents move into the area, rather than waiting until the people have firmly settled themselves in the neighborhood.

A plan for church growth

By their very nature and purpose, high-rise housing estates contain a large number of people living closely together. Since evangelism should always be focused in areas where people are found, these high-rise apartments should be given great attention in church-planting evangelism. It is clear that in all the major cities of the world where there are large quantities of high-rise apartment estates the church should seek to establish new congregations, cell groups, evangelistic centers in their midst. The goal should be to start one active and evangelically oriented Christian center within each of these housing estates and even, if possible, in every block of apartments.

This means that a new style of church structure will need to emerge. These apartment-churches, or cell-groups, should not follow the traditional pattern of church extension — with its "edifice-centered complex." Instead, they will take the form of smaller, more flexible and simple Christian cell units — meeting in homes of Christian families or rented apartments or even in the local community halls.

If such a goal of creative and widespread evangelism leading to rapid church extension is to be adopted, then the churches in these housing estates can expect to increase from a few handfuls to hundreds. Growth will result when more new churches are rapidly multiplied in all responsive segments of the city. Up to now, few places in the world experience rapid church growth in high-rise housing communities because churches have not been able to develop a dynamic ministry among them. Too many of them have perhaps thought in terms of building the tradi-

tional type of large church structures (where the shortage of land and its high cost inhibit extensive church planting).

Bold plans for effective evangelism and church multiplication in high-rise housing estates must reckon with creative patterns of the "house-church" ministry. In most modern urban areas, land is both scarce and extremely costly. And yet because these high-rise residential centers have a high concentration of people we need to develop a new structure of church extension which is to be more flexible and simple. It is necessary if the people living in high-rise areas are to be disciplined that a greater number of house-churches must be developed.

The advantages and disadvantages of house churches

A number of significant factors favor the rapid extension of smaller and less formal house-churches. Some of these are as follows:

(i) *The New Testament example* — It seems unlikely that the rapid church growth as we read in Acts was contributed to by the building of large assembly places. The gatherings for worship and fellowship, the teaching and nurture of new converts, all took place in an extensive network of house-churches. Abundant references to "oikos" or "the church in thy house" are found in Acts and the Pauline epistles (Acts 18:8; Cor. 1:16). It is also clear from Paul that the regular gatherings of Christians in the homes were no temporary phenomenon (cf. I Cor. 16:19, Col. 4:15, Acts 20:20).

(ii) *The economic factor* — Less capital cost and funding is required to get new churches started. It also allows for more flexibility and mobility of the centers of witness and worship. The house-churches can always be located where people are found to be most responsive.

(iii) *The psychological factor* — Conceivably there will be less prejudice on the part of non-Christians coming to a gathering in the home rather than in a religious sanctuary. Just as Christians are reluctant and resistant to the invitation to attend a non-Christian worship service in a Buddhist or Hindu temple or a muslim mosque, non-Christians have the same feeling when invited to our worship service in a traditional church building.

(iv) *The sociological factor* — Most non-Christians hold the view that churches are for the affluent, the middle-class, and the educated. Conventional church buildings tend to give an image that they are costly structures and meant for those who can afford their upkeep. Apartment house-churches can help to correct this image — that Christianity is meant for the masses and ordinary people living in the same environment.

(v) *The strategic factor* — House-churches with the apartment blocks would be accessible to all in the community, and their facilities extended until all the resident Christian families living in these apartments are known and identified. Although these house-churches would be small in terms of space, this can be compensated by developing more groups in any given housing area and thereby provide more centers for worship and evangelistic outreach.

However, in proposing this strategy, one needs to be cognizant of a number of obstacles and difficulties. These must be faced and resolved

before any workable plan can be executed. A number of factors can hinder a smooth implementation of the above suggestions for church planting in high-rise housing estates. They follow:

(i) *Government restriction* — Many countries have strong zoning regulations regarding the use of properties. Residential apartments are usually meant for residential purposes only. When such restrictive measures prevail in a country they can frustrate any plan for multiplying house-churches in high-rise housing estates.

(ii) *Satanic disruptions* — Evangelistic success is bound to create divisions and conflicts in any society. This is a fact about which the Bible speaks pointedly. Satan has no desire to see people become Christians; he will mobilize all his "powers" to frustrate the Christian cause. For example, in the same location where concerted Christian activity is contemplated, encounter is bound to take place with the adherents of other religions. They cannot be expected to be sympathetic to Christianity. They may object to Christians meeting in their immediate neighborhood for worship, hymn singing, and other forms of Christian activity.

(iii) *Limitation in space* — House-churches are necessarily limited in size. This means the problem of adequate space will become acute for the growing congregation. This limitation will also tend to restrict the variety of activities in which the congregation can engage; so people may be deterred from joining. Another factor might be the environment. People living in the same neighborhood may not find attendance in a house-church within the same block congenial for their religious activities. They may wish for a change in environment. Obviously this can be overcome by the attractive and helpful quality of the worshipping community.

(iv) *Noise and absence of privacy* — Worshipping in a congested area can be a real hindrance in these densely populated housing estates. First, there will be considerable noise surrounding these churches. Second, they will lack the sort of privacy needed for meditation and prayer. Little can be done to ameliorate the noise and provide the privacy. Some people will naturally find these centers distracting and difficult. Others will welcome them. But one should expect that some will use this as an excuse for not going to church.

(v) *Demanding pressures on families* — Meeting in the homes of Christian families demands a large measure of devotion from the whole family, since this will bring no little inconvenience to the family routine. If there are one or two in the family who are not Christians or who are uncommitted, they may resent the regular use of their home for such a purpose. Meeting in homes over an indefinite period may also mean that not too many families will want to offer their homes for such a use. This will then seriously limit the number and permanence of new congregations which can be set up.

(vi) *Attitude towards a holy place* — People tend to associate the worshipping of God with special places. This is an attitude which may take a long time to change. Some may never see how a place can be regarded as holy if it is "unconsecrated." Many people have fixed ideas as to what a religious center of worship ought to be like. A bare hall, no familiar altar, no organ, no stained glass windows — this may not be the kind of place which some people would regard as a church. For example, many

would hesitate to come to a house-church for a Christian wedding ceremony.

(vii) *Lack of trained leaders* — If a great number of churches are to be planted then obviously the supply of Christian leaders must be greatly increased. This could be either a problem or a challenge. Obviously if there is a lack of trained leaders it will limit the number of house-churches which can be opened up. Besides, it is possible that these lay leaders will be supporting themselves by a "tent-making" ministry. This will mean a sharp limitation of their time for church service and will inevitably pose the problem of the congregation's receiving inadequate pastoral care. Also, we must expect that the teaching and instruction provided in some of the smaller congregations will doubtless suffer in quality.

Surmounting the problems

It can be said that if there are no obstacles there will be no challenge. If there is no challenge there will not be the incentive to *innovate* and to *accomplish* the extraordinary task. If Christians dare to set their goals and sights high, they can expect, with God's help, the possibility of doing something great for him.

This is a challenge which all urban churches should face in the seventies. The proposal to multiply churches in all receptive segments of the city must be regarded as feasible and that God desires it.

Christians in Singapore are living in days of exciting and unprecedented opportunities. They must see the population's responsiveness as evidence that God himself is at work and that he means to bring in a spiritual harvest.

There are problems, but there are solutions also. The key to effective evangelism leading to rapid church growth has to be seen from different angles. They are:

(i) Develop and train a large number of unpaid leaders to initiate and pastor the new house-churches.

(ii) Develop and create a new pattern of ministry and worship to fit the local situation.

(iii) Out of this impulse towards indigeneity, a dynamic and new style of evangelism (led by dedicated, trained and creative leaders) will emerge.

(iv) When more creative leaders emerge they will find ways and means to overcome the property barrier. Existing church centers as well as new ones, will be fully utilized and a variety of programs will be developed.

(v) *Christian impact on the nation* — The multiplication of churches inevitably means more people are converted to Christ. With more Christians the impact on society will be greater. There is power in the Gospel. When more people are converted, the potential is present for moral and social reforms in society. Good works, service to humanity, and social concern flow from men's experience of conversion and reconciliation to God. Without neglecting the importance of clear verbal witness, Christians in these high-rise housing estates should be taught and encouraged to take active part in all civic and community activities within their neighborhood.

Conclusion

Here then, is a strategy for achieving the goal — to disciple the whole urban population for Christ. The key factor lies in the church's ability to train sufficient leaders to become "church planters" so that new centers of witness may be rapidly extended to all areas of opportunities.

There should not be tens or hundreds but thousands of new churches. The challenge before the Christians is "not to be limited by the small expectations of our forefathers nor measure tomorrow's advances by yesterday's defeats." In making this proposal for thousands of new house-churches we would not minimize the role and contribution of the larger and older established churches. It calls for a re-evaluation of the role of these older churches. In one respect they can function as the "cathedral church" — in a satellite pattern — with perhaps ten to fifteen smaller house-churches related to them for the purpose of wider support, teaching, and large-scale assemblies. In this way the weaknesses and limitations of the smaller house-churches can be remedied by the larger and more established congregations. Likewise, the lack of vitality and static nature of the older churches will have the stimulation of these fresh and dynamic youthful congregations.

As this plan for growth is implemented, the seemingly static churches in our cities can be transformed into growing and dynamic churches during this decade of the seventies. This then could conceivably become the turning point of Christianity in the world: as it moves rapidly towards the fulfillment of the Great Commission in our generation.

HIGHRISE, FLAT AND APARTMENT EVANGELISM REPORT

Secretary: Waldron Scott

The group consisted of approximately 15 North Americans and 10 Europeans, plus two or three participants from other continents. There were no representatives from Latin America, except on the final day. Africa had no representation except for one white South African. Similarly, Asia was meagerly represented by two from Singapore and two Americans working in Korea and South Vietnam respectively.

Attention is drawn to the composition of the group because this had a clear bearing on some of the conclusions reached by the participants.

Main Conclusion

This study group wishes to call attention, as much as possible, to the fact that the global evangelical community appears to be unaware, or far too inadequately aware, of the significance of urban evangelization in general and of highrise evangelism in particular.

Urban areas represent perhaps the most underestimated evangelistic need in the world today. This especially appears to be the case with respect to Third World countries. Between 1920 and 1960 urban population increased 500% in Latin America and Africa, 400% in South Asia and nearly 400% in East Asia. Most of this urban increase is focused in huge housing complexes which fill the horizons of modern cities everywhere.

In Singapore 60% of the population lives in these highrise complexes. The percentage is even higher in other major metropolitan areas. This is the fastest-growing sector of urban life. Yet most highrise dwellers are unevangelized and unchurched. Unless evangelicals awake to the challenges and opportunities represented by highrise housing, we are likely to fail altogether in our objective of fulfilling the Great Commission.

The conclusion just expressed is the most important statement the group wishes to make known to Congress participants and other readers. In addition to evaluating the need for highrise evangelism, the group discussed the special character of highrise residents and the evangelistic problems presented by them. The group also considered at length the strategy proposed by Rev. James K. Wong of Singapore as well as other alternatives and modifications.

Characteristic Features

Highrise dwellers tend to be suspicious of outsiders (though perhaps no more so than other urbanites). They are frequently lonely and isolated from community life. Many complexes are locked and guarded against outsiders. In some metropolitan areas highrise occupants are transient, in other cities they may be quite permanent.

Highrise dwellers are not confined to a particular economic class. But where a particular complex is primarily composed of residents from lower economic levels, conditions are apt to be crowded. Consequently