

## ***An Urban Strategy for Africa***<sup>1</sup>

by Timothy Monsma

1979

No, it is not a book for city planners throughout Africa. It is a proposal for new strategies for evangelism in the cities of Nigeria with special reference to the major Tiv Protestant Church, NKST. This study is a condensed revision of Monsma's doctoral dissertation. It is an address to a wide range of people: pastors, missionaries, missiologists, American students. But it is first of all "a manual for African church leaders" in the cities. As a manual it is a good work not only, but in some sense it can even be described as "revolutionary" – and can there be a greater recommendation these days?

This is an interdisciplinary study, combining urban sociology with evangelistic concerns. The sources for Monsma's sociological data are varied. Besides his having experienced Nigerian society at length, Monsma utilized standard sociological writings. He furthermore sent a team of 8 theological students to Nigeria's cities, armed with a questionnaire. They were to interview Protestant and Roman Catholic Tiv, both men and women, who had moved into cities. They supplied the author with 1200 filled-in questionnaires, but Monsma reduced the number he utilized to about 600 by "a systematic random sampling method" he does not explain. Upon receipt of these documents, Monsma himself traveled to these cities to tie up loose ends and clear up certain data. His research assistants also were successful in persuading 29 people to write their autobiographies, mostly in Tiv, which provided Monsma with a number of intimate snapshots, some of which he shares with his readers.

The first section of the book deals with the phenomenon of urbanization in Nigeria. He describes the forces encouraging urbanization and illustrates each with reference to a particular city. He then proceeds to define the city and describes some of its main characteristics, including problems. Monsma then

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<sup>1</sup>For background information, see our *Every Square Inch*, vol. 2, p. 230.

undertakes a description of social classes and their relations to each other within urban fellow tribesmen.

Having dealt with the sociology of the city in summary fashion, Monsma takes up a discussion of NKST in the cities away from Tivland. Various types of growth are discussed, including the influence of schools. Various sociological factors are brought to bear upon the question of church growth as well as obstacles to that growth. After having presented all this background, the author leads us into a discussion of a wholistic approach to evangelism/mission in the Nigerian city on the part of a uni-tribal church. The previous materials are really preparatory to this section.

Throughout the discussion a number of problems surface that the church must face if it is to have an effective urban witness. There is the question of the tribal church. Whereas traditionally missions have refused to recognize the tribe as a legitimate social base for a denomination, under the influence of the Church Growth Movement the positive function of the tribe has received greater emphasis. It is alleged that a uni-tribal church has greater cohesion not only, but also greater appeal to prospective Christians. The Christian Reformed Church (CRC) has intimate relations with two churches in Nigeria, the Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria and NKST. The former is a multi-tribal and multi-lingual church, whereas NKST is basically uni-tribal. The former church is facing acute problems that at least partially arise from its multi-tribal composition, precisely points where the more cohesive NKST is much stronger. Monsma asks rhetorically whether becoming a Christian means becoming detribalized and firmly answers in the negative. After summarizing the main models which various denominations have adopted in the cities, he pleads for unity in diversity. Let people worship in their own tongue – if that is their preference. The author is aware, however, of the strong temptation isolation offers to such tribal churches and thus he recommends a strong emphasis on ecumenical bonds in the community. Whether or not one agrees with Monsma on this score, it would perhaps be a bit hypocritical for a CRC writer to demand an integrated multi-ethnic church, considering the composition of his own denomination!

A very acute problem to which Monsma draws attention is the fact that the educated tend to leave the church. The more educated one becomes, the greater the statistical chance is that he will leave the church. This problem partly arises from the fact that the urban church operates with a rural spirit, but a more serious reason is emphasized, namely, that the church operates with a dualistic vision. It is the same problem pointed out by Eugene Rubingh in his book on the Tiv church as well as by yours truly in his recently-published dissertation, *Missionary Messengers of Liberation in a Colonial Context*. Dualism always ends up paying insufficient attention to the world in which most people find themselves most of their waking time – their work. The source of this dualism is located in the missions, including that of the CRC, which have failed to instill a vision of the full width of the Kingdom of God. The result is that the Gospel as preached gives little guidance to the professional and to the politician which, consequently, tend to leave the church as irrelevant.

I am grateful to Monsma for drawing this problem to our attention. My experience is that such remarks within the mission body of the CRC are not always welcome. Mission PR efforts often seek to emphasize the wide scope of the Gospel, but in reality the few missionaries who have been really concerned about the full Gospel have had rough sledding and have had to struggle for a recognition of the type of concerns for which Monsma is pleading. Most missionaries speaking about applying the full Gospel do so in categories derived from the Evangelicals, not from Reformed theology. In all fairness, it must be added that such struggles have not been in vain and the CRC mission in Nigeria is now devoting manpower and finance to such a ministry. But, considering the scope as Monsma unveils it, what is one man and \$2,000?

One cannot possibly discuss all the problems. There is that of monopoly played by the clergy – sound familiar? – over against which Monsma rightly suggests the need for allowing laymen their rightful role. There is the fact that preaching is often of rather poor quality, for which Monsma proposes continued instruction of both lay and clergy. The failure to properly instruct young people in the urban church is correctly highlighted as a serious one that begs for correction. In not too many books on evangelism does one have his attention drawn to prostitutes as

frequently as in this one. Monsma even had a meeting with some of them. For a moment I thought he was about to suggest a Christian association of prostitutes! He wisely stopped short of that point!

BUT – and is there ever a review without a few “but’s”? There are indeed a few problems in the book. The title hardly indicates the subject. There are statements open to serious challenge. For example, just because NKST did not receive any new members through an ecumenical mass evangelism effort, it cannot therefore be said that her participation did not aid in drawing people to Christ. Louis Berkhof was not the originator of the distinction between church as institute and organism. In his attempt to present a broad approach to evangelism, it would have been better if Monsma had set the Great Commission next to the Cultural Mandate instead of the Great Commandment. It would have provided him with a firmer theological base for a wide definition of evangelism. His failure to bring the Cultural Mandate into the discussion may well be responsible that, for all his admirable efforts to relate evangelism to the wide Kingdom of God, Monsma still experiences a tension between spiritual and physical concerns. He still refers to them as “two Christian concerns,” an indication that he has not yet reached the integration of the “two” that he might have arrived at had he utilized the concept of the Cultural Mandate. The author’s intimation that with the end of formal colonialism Western economic exploitation has also come to an end is simply false. I wonder whether the suggestion that Christians should seek a balance between capitalism and socialism is not more the heritage of the Greek notion of virtue being the mean between two vices rather than the fruit of Christian reflection. Monsma’s suggestion that urban churches should organize “all-church swimming parties” strikes me as unworthy of a missionary in the Nigerian context! I regret that Monsma did not utilize all his questionnaires, for it would have strengthened his case – or perhaps changed it.

However, these reservations are recorded mainly for the benefit of the reviewer. Monsma has a host of positive suggestions for valid ministry that call for all the talents and inclinations residing in the whole Body of Christ. They range from importing university lecturers to sports, hotels and restaurants, ministry to politicians, apartment evangelism, etc. I am deeply grateful for Monsma’s study

and highly recommend it not only to people interested in foreign missions, but also to those concerned with evangelism in the cities of North America.

Just a personal note. Tim, too bad you left Nigeria. I never realized we had a potential prophet in you. The Tiv church could use the likes of you. Any chance of returning to take up your own challenge?