SEEKING
URBAN
SHALOM

Integral urban mission in a new urban world

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Introduction

From Shantaram to Shalom

Darren Cronshaw

When I read Shantaram, the 2003 novel by Gregory David Roberts, my eyes were opened to the precarious life of people in slums in Asia. It is a classic story of a tragic character who is running away from his past and finds meaning and purpose through new relationships and serving his adopted community. "Lindsay Ford", as the main character calls himself on his fake passport, was a convicted bank robber and heroin addict who escaped Sydney Australia's Pentridge Maximum Security Prison in broad daylight in 1980. He was escaping through Mumbai (Bombay), India, en route to Europe, but stayed and grew to love the city. Lindsay meets the taxi driver Prubaker whom he hires as a guide. As their friendship evolves, Prubaker takes Lin home to his village and introduces him to his mother, who sees something of peace in Lin and gives him a new name Shantaram, "Man of God's Peace". On their trip back they are robbed, forcing Lin to live in Navy Nagar slum. An added benefit is the shelter the slum provides him from the authorities, and it opens up a whole new world of engaging his adopted city.

On the day of his arrival in the slum, a fire sweeps the neighborhood – yet another blow to poor and struggling inhabitants. In response, Lin sets up a free health clinic. As he grows to love and serve his adopted community, he learns their customs and culture, becomes fluent in Marathi, trades with a leper community, and experiences the joys and betrayals of life in Mumbai. The story takes exciting twists and turns with the promise and loss of love, a stint in abusive Arthur Road Prison, employment with the Mafia, and weapon smuggling to Afghanistan. It is the first but middle book of a planned trilogy, so more exciting adventures are coming that will continue to explore the theme of alienation and its conflict, exile and search for meaning that Roberts says is characteristic of the twentieth-century. But what most fascinated me was Shantaram's love for the Asian city of Mumbai and its food, transport, music, dance, movies, Sufi poetry and people.¹

The author, Gregory Roberts, did literally escape from Pentridge in 1980. After being captured and finishing this book based loosely on his experience in India, he is an activist.

¹ Gregory David Roberts Shantaram (London: Abacus, 2003). See also his essay which is instructive concerning the novel's background and literary layers: Gregory David Roberts, "The Architecture of the Novel, Shantaram" (2010), accessible at http://www.shantaram.com/
and helps with the World Health Organization, Doctors without Borders and other charities and NGOs. When asked how eager volunteers might help alleviate poverty, Roberts commits to practically engaging tangible needs of urban poverty and seeking urban shalom, and reminds me to expect to grow and learn so much from those I seek to serve.

A second book that has significantly opened my eyes to the needs in slums and squatter neighborhoods, and particularly the need for integral mission that addresses spiritual, emotional and physical poverty – is Ash Barker’s *Slum Life Rising*. Drawing on experience in another Asian city and its slums – Bangkok, Thailand – Barker grapples with the humanitarian, demographic, theological, personal, relational and team-building challenges of responding to the huge and expanding humanitarian crisis in urban slum and squatter settlements. Without avoiding the complex financial, power and health dilemmas, he pronounces an imagination-grabbing call to incarnational mission as “enfleshing hope” in situations that are often very desperate and under-resourced. He describes this context of mission as a “perfect storm” of poverty with its overwhelming enmeshed and complex challenges:

“The various ‘fronts’ of poverty kept thundering together, causing misery to multitudes: evictions, fires, floods, urbanisation, vulnerable employment conditions, dangerous housing conditions, sewerage inadequacies, superstitions, corrupt officials, language barriers, sanitation problems, AIDS and other preventable infectious diseases, premature deaths of children, the disabled and the elderly, and often no meaningful connection with Christians.”

What is an appropriate Christian response to this new urban world? Ministry in this context is challenging from many angles. There is a desperate need for bold and compassionate incarnational mission – workers who are prepared to suffer exile from

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2 http://www.shantaram.com/, CaringSharing tab.

their own consumerist world and relocate, adopt a simpler lifestyle, learn local culture and language, advocate for justice and minister compassionately (Shantaram style, but without the vice!). Where is incarnational mission happening at its best, and what can we learn its best practice?

The International Society for Urban Mission was formed in 2012 to encourage urban Christians to seek God’s Shalom in cities, especially in the Majority World, and to come together to seriously grapple with issues of urban poverty. ISUM facilitates solidarity, reflection and leadership development through sharing resources and training, Urban Learning Exchanges, the New Urban World journal, and the ISUM Summit for Urban Mission. The first ISUM Summit met in Bangkok 26-29 January 2013, hosted by the Evangelical Church of Bangkok. It was a significant gathering of 200 diverse activists, leaders and thinkers collaborating and seeking to discern together how to foster God’s reign in our increasingly urbanized world. The gathering was not isolated to conference talks, but invited participants to experience Thai culture and go as small groups to 30 immersion experiences to learn from Bangkok activists and diverse mission contexts. Participants then gathered the lessons from these local experiences, and brought their own stories and insights from the Summit, into seven ISUM working groups whose task was to draft the seven briefing papers now forming most of this book. We wanted reflection that was grounded in grassroots engagement and serious conversation with one another, and seeking God together, around the relevant biblical, strategic, demographic and global justice issues.

The overall theme of the Summit and this book is Integral Urban Mission. In cooperating with the mission of God, we want to engage with compassionate service, advocacy for justice, faith-sharing, church planting and care for creation. ISUM assumes these different expressions of the mission heart of God are all valid and integrally related. They represent what really is good news about Christian hope – that God cares for people and their circumstances and world. As Michael Frost pleads: “We feed the hungry because in the world to come there will be no such thing as starvation. We share Christ because in the world to come there will be no such thing as unbelief”.

To foster shalom, it is imperative that we cooperate with God in the breadth of his concern for the world and its cities.

Rosalee Velloso Ewell, in “The Word on the Street: Biblical reflections on God’s Reign in the City”, reminds us that cities are not new in God’s plan and have always been places of the best virtues and the worst vices. She draws on Genesis, Isaiah and Philippians to

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examine how we can hear the gospel invitation to dwell in cities, not just reside; share life, not just have the same postcode; and live the good news on the street for others, not just live for our own sake.

The first working group briefing paper is “Sowing Seeds of Shalom in the Neighborhood”, compiled by Geoff and Sherry Maddock. These urban missionaries and micro-farmers from Lexington, Kentucky are passionate about neighborhood transformation. They encourage Christians to embrace mission wherever they are “placed” locally not just in global generalizations; as neighbors not just church members; and taking an interest in justice and ecology not just individuals and their salvation. I love their encouragement to walk, plant, bake and shop locally as expressions of neighborliness.

John H Quinley Jr with John H Quinley, III discuss a variety of economic responses to urban poverty in “Urban Economic Shalom: Possible Place of Peace and Economic Growth”. International macroeconomic theory and microfinance, business as mission and social entrepreneurship all have a place if they can help foster a new economic way of being for the world’s poorest. God is concerned with unjust economics which affect the poor, and the Quinleys want to invite people to pray and to work to make a difference with alternative economic frameworks.

Cori Wittman and Aimee Brammer investigate the imperative and dilemmas of working for liberation, in their chapter “Release the Oppressed, and others Suffering from Injustice”. They examine the complex and multifarious world of human trafficking, the biblical inspiration to set such people free, where interventions are needed (not just raids and rescues but viable restoration), case studies of structural breakthroughs, and a wealth of practical implications.

Amy Brock-Devine, Beth Barnett, Kimberly Quinley and Matthew Wilson, in “Empowering Children and Young People: Imagining a Better Future in the Global City”, urge us to recognize the vulnerability of children in cities. Through a practice of “reverse-dreaming”, their working group imagined a city without exploitation of children and then discussed what the church would need to do to help the city get to that positive future. This paper is honest about the challenges but also optimistic about protecting and healing children and young people.

Paul Cameron and Doug Priest have collated and edited “A Movement of the Spirit: Fueling Church Movements among the Urban Poor”. They celebrate stories of urban missionaries building relationships and trust, learning from voices inside slums, integrating evangelism with social action, and empowering local leaders. For example, Second Chance Bangkok is a recycling shop where UNOH is serving the needy and
inviting other neighbors to come alongside and help, and along the way generating employment and hosting a Bible study. This chapter urges joining with God’s integral mission and God’s fueling of church movements.

John Baxter-Brown, Sharmila Blair and Rosalee Velloso Ewell, in “Joining God in the Challenges and Opportunities of Multi-faith Cities”, explore the dynamics of living and dialoguing with people from diverse religious backgrounds and implications for witness and collaboration. The writers reflect on their visits to a Buddhist temple, Bangkok Breast Cancer Support Group and Bangkok Refugee Centre, and discuss the document Christian Witness in a Multi-religious World. They underline how important it is for Christians to deepen their understanding of their own faith, to broaden their understanding of what others believe, and to engage in evangelism with boldness and respect.

Lynette Leach, Scott Bessenecker and Andrew Menzies address key personnel matters in “Recruit, Equip and Sustain Christian Leaders in a New Urban World”. They discuss the huge needs and opportunities for recruiting people for tough urban contexts, equipping them for ministry with accessible training, and sustaining them with intentional support networks and spiritual practices. Among other things, urban missionaries need to be resilient, especially through inevitable disappointments and potential crises of faith. Young people from the affluent West and leaders from the Majority world are taking an interest in urban mission, but better recruitment, mentoring and support are key needs if we are ever going to redress the imbalance and lack of workers in slums.

Mari Muthu, Natagamon Roongtim (Earth) and Mary Kamau share in interview format the challenges and opportunities of their urban mission contexts in India, Thailand and Kenya.

Shane Claiborne in "Lessons from the Good Samaritan" teaches profound implications from this familiar story. His challenge includes not being so busy not to be interrupted by people’s pain and injustice, and not to be too comfortable avoiding places where people get beat up. As well as reading the story with the Good Samaritan’s compassion as an example, he also urges working to make the streets safe in the first place, and to find grace even when you find yourself in a ditch, beaten up by life and abandoned by religious folks. Finally, it is a story that shows the Samaritan using his own resources as well as collaborating with the innkeeper to restore the injured traveller. We need one another, which is the basis of the Summit and ISUM’s role in helping us seek urban shalom.

There are some important recurring themes through the chapters. Foundationally, for
example, we are invited, like the exiles Jeremiah addressed, to plant ourselves and seek the shalom of the city in the place where God sends us (Jeremiah 29:4-7). There is an imperative to develop appropriate servant leaders and incarnational missionaries. And we need to encourage and learn from the best practices of indigenous missionaries as well as help Western mission workers bridge the gap of power and finance.

Missional strategist Alan Roxburgh maintains the resources for discovering God’s vision and dream are found within the people of God in that place. A key discernment practice is listening conversation and dialogue. Says Roxburgh: “The great reality of the church is that by the Spirit, God’s imagination for the future is already among God’s people, and so the work of leadership is in the cultivation of the environment that will allow this imagination to gather energy.” Be encouraged to open yourself to new directions and insights through the experiences and conversations this book echoes.

My confession is that I don’t live in a slum or squatter settlement. Our church is in the inner-eastern suburbs of Melbourne. Our home is rare in our street not to have a swimming pool and multiple cars. But ISUM members help open my eyes to see the poverty that does exist in my neighborhood, and help open my heart to be involved locally and globally in seeking urban shalom.

I say deep thanks to those who have helped with editorial comment and proofreading and to the ISUM Summit organizers, hosts, presenters, working group facilitators and briefing papers compilers. Other associated articles, interviews and videos from the Summit are accessible at www.newurbanworld.org. We look forward to your response as readers to this book, and hope to see many of you at the second Summit hosted in Kuala Lumpur, June 28-July 1, 2014. It is ISUM’s hope that the conversations, reflection, prayer and activism generated from ISUM resources and gatherings will help us as we seek Shalom and cooperate with God’s mission in this new urban world.

1 in 2 humans are urbanites, 1 in 3 are living in urban poverty with 1 in 6 living in urban slums. So one billion people are “living in shit”, to borrow from Mike Davis’ description of the reality and struggle of slums around the globe. This is a stark and growing reality that the church, worldwide, is barely beginning to grapple with. Christian responses the rise of slums have been inadequate with only 1 in 500 international missionaries focusing on slums and around 1 in 10,000 national Christian workers, pastors and evangelists. But this largely unreached and forgotten group of people will likely grow to 2 billion by 2030 and 3 billion by 2050. This is one of the most urgent and missiologically significant issues

6 Barker, Slum Life Rising, 21-23, 102.
of this century. With slums on the rise (or sinking away), we might ask where would Jesus be found today? Jesus would be, and Jesus is, working alongside urban mission workers to stand in the gap for some of the most marginalized and vulnerable people on the planet. This first volume of the International Society for Urban Mission, *Seeking Urban Shalom: Integral Urban Mission in a New Urban World* is a conversation to learn from committed practitioners working at the grassroots of neighborhood community development, advocacy, liberation, church planting, inter-faith dialogue and leadership development.

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