

# What is "city church"?

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## The question and the vision

"City Church" is a relatively new concept in the Christian world, but a very innovative and challenging one. It is an inspiring vision of a broader perspective on **how the church of Jesus Christ can function in a modern city.**

What is it about? In a big city there are usually many churches, belonging to many denominations and ideologies. In the Bible we read that Jesus has one Church: He has a bride, not a harem! In the time of the apostles there was only one church in a city, and it was therefore "the church of Jesus Christ in Ephesus", in Corinth, etc. Today the situation is much more complex through 2,000 years of church history and the emergence of many different theologies. We all know today that there is not one church calling itself "the true church", but that there are as many churches as expressions of Christ. So the question is: how can "the Church of Jesus Christ" in its many forms be one, and how can the many churches together operate as one body in a city?



## Fragmentation

How does it usually work **in practice**? The relationships between the many churches in a city are sometimes partly good, sometimes tense, sometimes totally absent, sometimes aloof and suspicious, sometimes even downright hostile. In a large, international city is still a notch more difficult: there are many ethnic churches, with their different languages and cultures. Also in terms of spirituality and styles, there is a very wide range, from traditional, highly liturgical and "stiff" to free, exuberant and "wild", and there is often no understanding or appreciation of that otherness. Another factor that doesn't make it any easier is that many denominations come from abroad and their "offices" are founded under the direct authority of the head office, and therefore often isolated from the other churches in that city. These churches tend to have a stronger bond with sister churches (of the same denomination) 100 km further than neighboring churches (of another denomination) in their street. Is that right? Why are minor theological differences more important than the great commission of Jesus to reach the city together? In any case, this way no one has an overview of the ecclesiastical landscape, nobody has recognized leadership, the unity is hard to find, the church can not speak with one voice. Thus we see in some large cities a high percentage of Christians, but by their fragmentation, they have **no influence** on policy, because no one can speak on behalf of all of them. In the western world politics slips



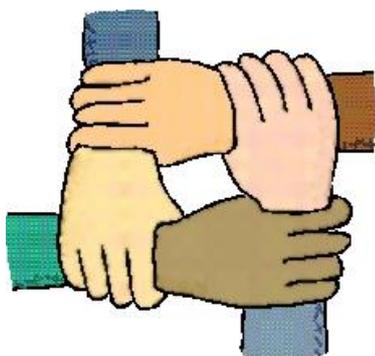
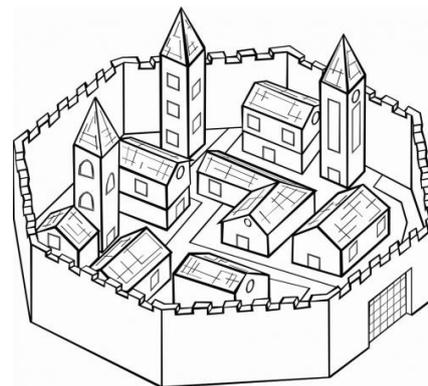
further and further away from Christian values, even if there is a majority of Christians! The crime, drug trafficking, pornography industry, loneliness, chaos, prostitution... are increasing, and the church has no salty, saving effect. The Light apparently can't stop the darkness: it is shielded by the many walls that are built around and between.

### Diversity or division?

As God looks down from heaven, he sees only one church that meets in many places and in many buildings. He sees at a glance who belongs to his body and who does not. In itself it is not wrong to come together in many places: there are many cultures, languages, peoples, worship styles... There may (and should!) be variety, because there are many kinds of people and also **many kinds of gifts**. God is not uniformity, but of many colors.

As no man can contain all aspects of God's wisdom, also, no church can reflect all the colors of God's wisdom (Ephesians 3:10). Most churches are good at one or a few areas and weak in others.

Every church family has certain talents and gifts, which they have to a greater extent than other churches. They understand and emphasize certain truths of the Bible better than others. One church can be strong in biblical teaching, the other in the gift of love, the other in theology, the other in spiritual freedom, the other in music and worship, the other in prayer, in one church there is much emphasis on evangelism in the other holiness, one invests in building healthy families and youth, the other in creativity and art ... One is (over) enthusiastic, full of life and growth, the other is sedate, balanced and mature, some Christians love modesty, the others love exuberance ...



One church is very hierarchical and authoritarian, the other very "democratic", loose and spontaneous. The same applies to nations and races: one nation has strong leadership gifts, another faith, one is strong in the prophetic, the other in hospitality, one in structure and organization, the other in charity ... And every local church will also be stronger in reaching a specific population group, or social class.

Each of these churches or cultures thus has its strengths, but also automatically its weaknesses and biases (which by their blind spot they usually do not

even see). Another church or spirituality does not need to be perceived as a threat, but can be very enriching or correcting. Even more: **we need each other** for mutual adjustment and supplement!

Diversity is good, but discord, competition, rivalry, jealousy ... not! The beautiful picture of Paul on one body and many members (1 Cor. 12: 12-31), we can apply to the church(es) of Christ in a city: there is no reason for us to feel we are more or less than another, to compare us with each other: if every church has its proper function in the right place, in a collegial atmosphere, it functions optimally as a Body. We can also compare it with a football team, even though you have eleven strong, talented players, there's somebody to put each of them in the right place and make a team with the firm desire to join together to score! Or in

other words, one church can only do a guerrilla, all churches together a full (spiritual) warfare.

### Salt and Light



Salt is not to salt oneself, and a lamp is not to shine on yourself. The "salt and light" of the church (Matt. 5:13-16) is intended for the world! The power of the church can and should therefore be measured by the changing effect it has on the world around her. It is known that during the revival in Wales (1905) numerous pubs had to close because so many drunks repented. The Sodom and Gomorrah of this time (as many of our big cities are!) can be saved if more than ten righteous live in it, in other words, if the Christians who live there do not put their light under a bushel, do not hide in their churches, but stand in the gap for their city and

are a voice to be heard.

Every true Christian has the desire that God's kingdom come, His will be done, laws are respected, here on earth as in heaven (Matt. 6: 9-10): he wants to see the gospel spread and hit in his neighborhood, his district, his street. For some churches or leaders, there is a **shift in theology** needed first: the purpose of our salvation is not that Christians are blessed for one hour every Sunday in their church, while the world outside goes down the drain. Jesus' great commission was not about individual souls being saved to go to heaven, but that "peoples (!) will be made disciples" and "God's will on earth (!) will happen." We can not narrow the gospel to (1) a purely individual matter and (2) heaven alone: God wants nations and cities, "tribes, languages and nations" to be saved, blessed, and this already on earth.

But the salt and light effects are most effective at leadership level. William Wilberforce (1759-1833) is a fine example of this: by his strong faith and 30 years of political action thanks to him the slave trade was abolished in England and later in other European countries. Every city controlled by godly men, will receive a higher degree of blessing: good laws and honest directors will bring prosperity and wellbeing. Ultimately, a whole **city can be "transformed"**<sup>1</sup> by the Word of God and the power of the gospel: the corruption at all levels will be effectively addressed, the prisons will empty, the crime rate will decrease, poverty will decline, the streets will be cleaner, the economy will grow, the security on the streets will be guaranteed, the police will have much less work ... So "we seek the peace of the city ..., we pray for her, for in its peace will be our peace" (Jeremiah 29:7).

### Collective authority

But for such a "collective task" there is collective authority needed and therefore unity. Many promises of God in the Bible are not for individuals, but for the whole of his body: we can receive them only if we work together as a whole (just like one footballer never gets the cup, but the entire team). The "gospel of the kingdom" that Jesus brought is bigger than the church, and certainly a local church: our conceptual frameworks must expand so that God's kingdom can break through in its fullness.

<sup>1</sup> The well-known video's of "Transformations" show examples of cities and areas over the whole world where this happens effectively.

Let us first illustrate this with an earthly city. When a mayor speaks as a private individual, it has no official authority, because it is not covered by the aldermen. If however he speaks officially, he has the authority to be the voice of the whole city, and his signature is binding. The same applies to the church in that city. For example, if in a certain city there are 10 churches, and a pastor speaks with the mayor, his word does not have much impact, because the mayor knows that he represents only one of the ten. But if the pastor can say: I speak on behalf of **a platform of all the churches** in this city, the mayor will listen very carefully. The main idea behind "city church" is that all churches in that city learn to act together as one church, pray and speak with one voice. The church in a city can only speak the word of God with authority on behalf of the whole people of God when she is one.



One or a few leaders can, on behalf of the platform, build relationships with the city government, a direct contact with the mayor, and be a Christian voice to him on ethical and other issues. But they can also offer prayer and ask where the Christians can provide practical help. Such a city church can further eg set up joint **evangelism** and develop a major campaign organize that will not go unnoticed. She could start joint **social support** (shelter, food distribution ...) in the city that is much stronger than ten small separate projects that are struggling to survive. They can set up a joint **house of prayer**, a place where all Christians day and night can come to pray for the city. They can jointly start a **24-hour prayer chain** and complete it, and in that way set a spiritual wall around the city against decadent influences. Corporate **worship** is many times stronger than each-one-in-his-little-corner. But also an **art exhibition** by all Christian artists or a joint choir belong to the possibilities. **Young people** will see this and follow it and have camps together, organize concerts and reach their peers. In short, the salted and healing effect of the gospel will find plenty of open doors and channels in the city.

"I sought for a man among them, who should build up the wall, and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found none". Ezek. 22:30

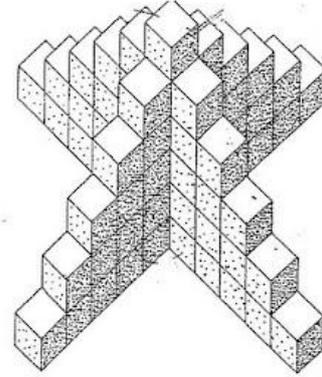
## Urban planning and development



Unity between churches is similar to urban planning. If there is no urban plan in a city or no rules for urbanization exist (or if nobody respects the rules!), a monster of a city is created: a **ransom mix of styles and materials** that contrast and collide with one another, causing the city not to have identity nor soul. She is not only unsightly and ugly, but eventually also inaccessible to traffic and unlivable because everything is closed up. God builds his church as a heavenly city (think of the New Jerusalem), and has set clear guidelines in His Word. God is the owner

and builder, and he decides how his church to be built: it is not for the masons to make their own plan to work, and He is rightly indignant when his "staff" do it at their own "discretion"! We will have to adapt our construction method to God's design!

In the reality of church landscape we often find a chaos of styles, directions and flavors. One builds far outside the lines, so you no longer can go through the street, the other builds opposite or against it, or just in the way. A Romanesque church next to a modernist, diagonally across an Eastern Orthodox or across a gothic ... one in sandstone, the other in brick, the latter in iron, glass and concrete ... Even if these churches are each in itself beautiful, there is not much imagination to see that the whole picture is a disaster. God has a mental model of a city (the new Jerusalem), but our churches are usually structured differently, along the lines of



denominations, with separations right through the town. Some missionaries think they need to build an exact copy of the mother church abroad and will import besides the gospel an alien culture as well. Denominations certainly have a specific function and bring unity among like-minded, but can also be an obstacle to the city church, when the walls between the various churches are higher than those around the city.

There may and must be room for creativity, originality and diversity in God's kingdom, but there is also the need for **a minimum of respect for each other** and for the whole order. If someone arrives in a town, and starts building a church without any contact with the existing churches, without knowledge or consultation, without respect for what was already built ..., is he building God's kingdom or his own? Where is the love of brothers and sisters, and for the rest of God's building?

If God Himself would build His church, He would perhaps first break down a lot that does not fit in his heavenly landscape, where "**building violations**" were committed to build them again according to His blueprint. And the only spiritual materials that match a spiritual and heavenly kingdom are "gold, silver and precious stones" (1 Cor. 3:12), ie supernatural, pure love, a motivation which is refined in the furnace of any leftover selfishness, ambition, selfishness or lust.

In a certain city in South America, there was a functioning city church, consisting of all Christian leaders of that city. When a new church planter arrived in the city and began to evangelize, they invited him to their meeting. He was very nervous because he expected distrust, hostility and critical questions such as: "Are there not enough churches in this city? Why did you come into our pond?" ... But on the contrary, he was warmly welcomed, he was thanked to come and work in the city, they jointly prayed for him, he was encouraged and helped with much good advice. That is the true spirit behind a city church!

## A wall around the city

The image of an old walled city is also great to illustrate what is happening spiritually. The elders in ancient Israel who sat in the gate, determined who came in and who stayed outside. A well-functioning city church builds **a mental wall** around its city (Ezek13: 5, 22:30), by prayer and their testimony they keep the evil outside. "On your walls, Jerusalem, I have appointed watchmen. Never will they remain silent day or night" (Isaiah 62:6). Christians, Christian leaders and intercessors have more responsibility and influence than they usually realize, but they do not always use them.



In the current reality, however, the spiritual walls are not built around the city, but across it: between neighborhoods, communities, denominations, churches and theologies. In order to build a city, there is a need for a **Nehemiah**

**figure:** the gifts required for this are not given to everyone. To put it in New Testament terms: shepherds care for their flock, but apostles build a city: they

are the builders (1 Cor. 3:10) that the other four ministries (pastor, evangelist, teacher, prophet) put in place. What made Nehemiah special? First and foremost, God gave in his heart a passion that brought him to tears about the desolate state of Jerusalem, so strong that he could not do otherwise than fast (Neh. 1:4). Even Jesus wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41): if we are not deeply sad over the loss of our fellow citizens, what are we doing? These tears are probably the most powerful fuel

for **passionate prayer**. From Nehemiah's prayer, a plan was born. His call for the rebuilding of the walls was visionary and inspiring: because he came from the outside, he was not infected with the despondency of the Jerusalemites, he could impart faith and could stand above the local interest groups. He was selfless, and won the trust and moral authority. He had a clear plan, and distributed the workload among many smaller groups who each repaired part of the wall or gate. And each part is equally important, because it is

pointless to have 90% of the wall of a city very high and very strong when the other 10% is a mess. A city is only protected when each part is securely restored. **It is in the interests of all churches that every church is strong.** Despite opposition and ridicule, intimidation and blackmail, and even a conspiracy, Nehemiah could rebuild the wall in record time (52 days).

In this story we find all the necessary ingredients for building a modern city church: sadness and compassion that comes from God, passionate prayer (and fasting), a clear plan, a visionary and selfless leader above the local interests, and putting each group in its proper place.

You have not gone up to the breaches in the wall to repair it for the people of Israel so that it will stand firm in the battle on the day of the LORD (Ezek13:5)



Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings. (Isaiah 58:12)

## One in heart and soul

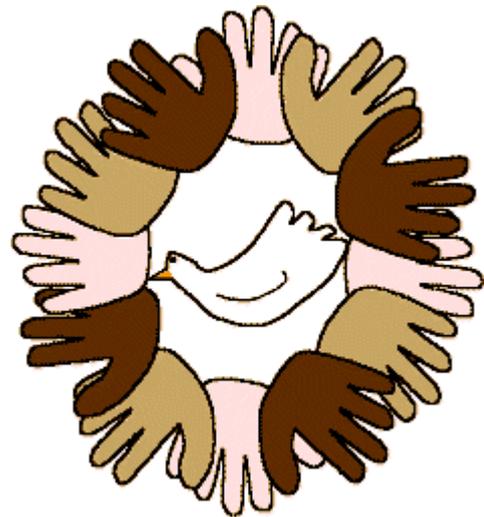
The most important thing in the concept of the city church is that we have **in our hearts** the attitude of **sincerely being happy** for any other church, organization or ministry in our neighborhood: we appreciate and bless them wholeheartedly in prayer and sometimes acts, and rejoice as they are more successful than we are. Any jealousy, feud, judgment, criticism, desire to promote themselves, must be radically eradicated. How often do we do something together is not the most important: it is the attitude of our heart. But if on the other hand, we never or seldom do things together, that bond of love cannot grow. By working together, the connectedness and appreciation also increases.



Many companies today do all kinds of **teambuilding**: any good boss knows that employees perform better when there is a strong collegial bond instead of each "doing his job" while coexisting. The same is even more true in God's kingdom: it is certainly a big step when the church leaders in a city work together in various projects, but in God's sight it is still weak when only functional "relationships" exist and they only meet each

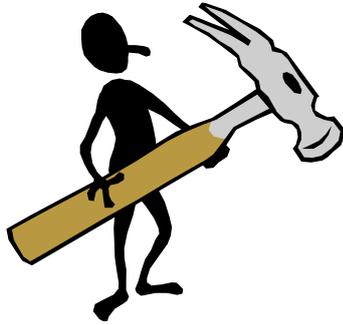
other on meetings. Unity can be much stronger and deeper: a regular breakfast together can help, having a coffee together and getting to know each other's families, talking heart to heart, sharing joint problems, being allowed to cry on each other's shoulder when frustrated, and praying for each other. You can create a cosy place where the pastors can put off their title and be **together as friends**, where they do not feel the need to impress others by the number of church members or great activities, but feel secure enough to show their weaknesses. Nobody has to prove anything, but there is a relaxed atmosphere to work together to laugh and to weep.

In a well-functioning city church, **the "spiritual aldermen"**, ie the set of all leaders in the city, make clear agreements (a code) on how they interact with each other. Stealing sheep and gossip about each other are the most destructive things for the atmosphere between churches. There will be a **joint policy** to discourage "church-hopping", how they deal with church members that change church, eg that in that case the leaders contact each other, and only receive members from another church if the other church can let them leave in peace. Good agreements bring about peace in the city and build confidence.



For many of us not only a shift in theology is needed, but also a **shift in vision**. When a new joint project is proposed today in a city, many church leaders question themselves: "What's in it for me?" But this is entirely the wrong

question and doesn't reveal a good Christian attitude. "How can I share a blessing with my brothers or sisters?" is much more in line with God's **Kingdom thinking!**



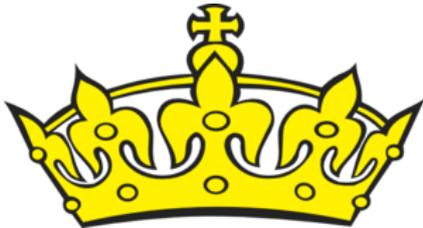
Unity is hard work, but if we wait and do nothing, the walls keep on existing. We need to **break walls with our own hands**, because we also have built them with our own hands! Rick Joyner told how, when he began his congregation in Charlotte (USA), he closed the church each summer for four weeks. He told his members that they were to go to other churches in the city, to get to know their brothers and sisters, and, if they would feel more at home there, that they had to stay. An active step to break through the mentality of "each his own

sheep", or not? The result was that those who returned to his church, were on the same wavelength and they really completely went for it. But it also changed the relationships between the churches in the city thoroughly!

### The ideal

The idea of a city church is a beautiful dream, but not an air castle: it comes from the heart of God for his Church. The church will be much stronger and more effective when it applies this: through its high "saltiness" it will keep the city from decay and rot. And even though this may not be realized 100% in any city on earth, each step in the right direction is a leap forward: even if only 20% would become reality, the blessing will increase tremendously. The spiritual atmosphere will greatly improve, the work will be lighter and more joyful, the harvest will be much more rewarding.

Meeting together, talking together and praying together of pastors is a crucial step in this direction, but is only step one: ultimately it comes together to



exercise authority together "to reign" together with Christ (Rom. 5:17) and to see the city change.

Ideally the churches regularly meet with the mayor and live in the best of terms: the city council asks for advice and counsel, the churches offer their services without wanting to dominate. Christians are active in the "seven mountains"<sup>2</sup> of society, ie the seven sectors that determine our culture: the economy (business, finance), government (government, politics), family (marriage), church, education (education, science), media (press) and arts / entertainment (entertainment, sports). They let God's name be glorified through art projects, theater and painting, that he will be welcome in youth care and psychiatry, in the music industry and in the courts, that He has a central place in asylum policy and the banking sector, the architecture and welfare, in literature and on the internet, at

<sup>2</sup> In 1975 the vision "seven mountains" was launched (by Bill Bright, founder of "Campus Crusade", Loren Cunningham, founder of "Youth With a Mission", and Francis Schaeffer at the same time but separately). The main idea is that a society consist of seven spheres of influence or sectors (compares to "mountains"), that influence our cultur.

the town hall and the police, among street workers and prisons, in school and in cinemas, in nurseries and homes for the elderly, in the cafes and entertainment... God's kingdom is greater than the church alone "God is king of all the earth" (Psalm 47:8). " The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it" (Psalm 24:1). And of Christ it is written, "Ask of me and I will give the nations for your inheritance, the ends of the earth for thy possession" (Psalm 2:8). Will we do our part to allow Him to come into his inheritance (ie, our country, our city)?

