

Planting Urban Churches

1 of 11

Excerpted from Keith Phillips, *Out of Ashes*, pp. 95-105
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Church planting is the most effective way to minister in our inner cities. *Becoming part of the Church—having a relationship with Jesus and with his followers—is the antidote to alienation.* God ordained the Church; it is the only institution that empowers the poor and sets them free! But coming to grips with the need for World Impact to plant churches required a journey of 25 years. Let me explain why it took us so long!

A Vision Develops

I grew up under the influence of Youth For Christ, where we channeled every new believer into an existing church. So when 16-year-old Jewel accepted Jesus in a Bible club on a vacant lot in Watts, we sent her to a local church, believing that she would be incorporated into that fellowship. But like so many other new Christians, Jewel said, “I do not fit in.”

Initially, we did not understand. Jewel had a hard time explaining why, but we took her at her word.

Most churches would have gladly posted a sign over their door saying, “Whosoever will, may come.” But usually, there was an additional, invisible sign that stated, “. . . as long as you are like us.”

Few members were aware of the invisible sign, but visitors saw it immediately. They *knew* if they *fit*, if there was a cultural match. People who did not feel comfortable because of dress, class, language or ritual, seldom returned.

We knew that Jewel needed to attend church. That was never a question. But since she did not fit into a neighborhood church, we brought her, along with scores of other inner-city teens, to the churches where our staff felt comfortable—often in the suburbs.



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In retrospect, most of these urban teenagers came to these middle-class churches because they wanted to please us and be with us. They doubtlessly felt culturally estranged by the worship style, and rarely, if ever, saw any hope of becoming an integral, contributing part of the church they attended. They were *going* to church (often out of their community) instead of *being* the Church.

In the meantime, World Impact was having Staff Fellowship meetings on Wednesday nights in missionary homes in South Central Los Angeles. All of our staff, along with their spouses and children, ate, worshiped and praised God together, and prayed for each other and those in our ministry. The biblical teaching was a highlight for many of us.

Before long, people to whom we ministered asked of they could come to Fellowship. They, too, wanted to pray, worship God, have fellowship, study and eat together with us.

I understood the new Christians' desire to fellowship and worship with people in their community with whom they felt comfortable; yet our missionaries needed a time alone. So I said that Fellowship was for staff only; it was a *staff meeting*.

I was convinced that people we led to the Lord needed to join a church. However, I had not thought of our staff as a "church," and starting new churches was a foreign concept to me.

But the new believers persisted, so before long, we agreed to have a "celebration service" on Saturday evenings for our teens and neighbors. I made sure that everyone knew it was not "church" (after all, there seemed to be plethora of inner-city churches). The last thing I thought we needed was more churches.

I had grown up Baptist, and there were Baptist churches all over. I could not understand why new believers would feel uncomfortable in a Baptist church. But my understanding was not the issue—they did not feel comfortable.

In spite of my reluctance, quasi-churches began springing up in our ministries from Watts to Newark. When new believers accepted Jesus, they desired to worship God with others in their neighborhood.

Before long, the worshipers asked, “Why can’t we move our service to Sunday morning like everyone else?” My initial response was, “We are not a church.” But after relentless questions, and much contemplation, I said, “We can meet on Sunday, but we will not call it ‘church’: we will call it ‘Celebration.’” So new believers from the city began worshiping together on Sunday morning . . . and later called it Celebration Church!

A Difference in Culture

I did not understand why new Christians seldom fit into local churches primarily because I was looking at the inner city in terms of color, ethnicity and race. East Los Angeles was mostly Mexican; Central and South-Central Los Angeles were predominantly African American. I mistakenly assumed that new Christians would be ministered to by *any* church composed predominantly of their race, but to my surprise, some people felt very out of place in certain churches even though they were the same race as the majority of the congregation.

It took me several years to realize that the issue was not “color” but “culture.” The following diagram helped me understand the inner city in terms of culture.¹

The dominant culture in the United States is Anglo-Saxon Protestant (ASP). This is no longer the majority culture, but it influences everyone who lives

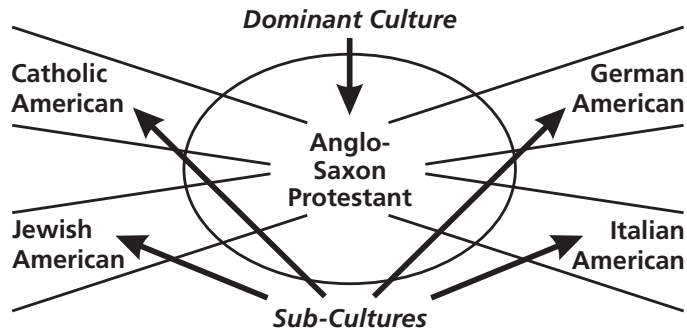
¹ None of us like to be stereotyped. The purpose of the diagram is not to box in any person but to understand the cultural dynamics at work within and between racial groups; dynamics that have specific application for reaching the unchurched urban poor.

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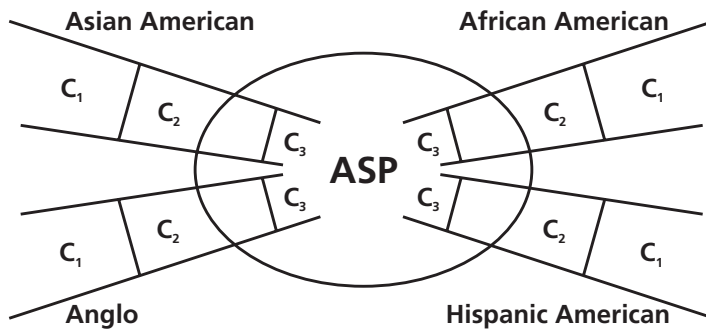
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here. There are numerous subcultures, e.g., German American, Catholic American, Jewish American and Italian American to name a few.



The urban culture has four major components: African American, Hispanic American, Anglo and Asian American. Each group is roughly divided into three subcultures noted as C₁, C₂, and C₃ (see following diagram).



Let me use the African-American group as a cultural example. The C₃ African American lives, works and has been *educated* in the Anglo-Saxon Protestant (ASP) world (see diagram below). On the diagram, she is surrounded on three sides by the dominant culture.



In Los Angeles, that could mean that she lives in Beverly Hills, works on Wilshire Boulevard and was educated at the University of Southern California. She has become part of the dominant culture. She could be an athlete, doctor, entertainer, engineer, attorney, politician or businessperson. She might be a proponent of Black power, but she wages her war for human rights from Beverly Hills.

The C₂ African American is bicultural.² His culture is dissected down the center (see below). Normally he lives in the inner city, but he works or is educated in the ASP world.



In Los Angeles, he might live in Watts but attend the University of Southern California. Or, he might live in South Central and work on Wilshire Boulevard. The C₂ African American is a talented individual who has learned to adapt to, and function effectively in, whichever culture he finds himself.

The C₂ person walks, speaks and dresses one way at work and another way at home. His actions, thinking, stature and the way he carries himself change as his environment changes.

The C₁ African American lives, works and is educated in the inner city (see below). His education may be formal or informal, obtained on the streets. However, his street education serves him well—he learns how to keep himself alive and how to provide for his immediate needs.



² The Apostle Paul was bi-cultural. He was a Jew by family; a Greek by town. He spoke Greek as well as Hebrew. He was a circumcised Jew and a Roman citizen.

Let me illustrate. The first year I was in Watts, I was walking down 103rd Street with three friends. Suddenly, one teenager yelled, and another guy shoved me to the ground. A moment later a bullet whistled over my head. As I brushed myself off, I looked at these friends in amazement and asked how they knew that a gun was going to be fired. They laughed at me and said, “You mean you’ve got an education from UCLA and you can’t even hear a gun cocking?” In certain environments, some kinds of education are more important than others.

Language: An Indicator of Assimilation

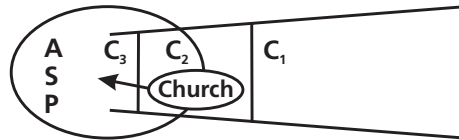
For new immigrants (primarily Asian and Hispanic) language is a good indicator of their degree of assimilation into the dominant culture. For example, a C₃ Hispanic American speaks fluent English, but may speak little or no Spanish. He works, lives and is educated in the dominant culture. He has no intention of returning to his native land and has adopted the views and values of the dominant culture.

A C₂ Hispanic American is bi-cultural and bi-lingual (often speaking Spanish at home, but English at work or at school). She lives in East Los Angeles (the inner city) but works or receives her education in the dominant culture. Her roots may still be in her homeland (she occasionally has passing thoughts of returning home if all does not work out in the United States). If Mexican, she celebrates *Cinco de Mayo* with equal or more vigor than the Fourth of July. She likely thinks in Spanish, wants to read important legal documents in Spanish and worships God most comfortably in Spanish.

A C₁ Hispanic American lives, works and is educated in the barrio. He might speak broken English, but uses Spanish most of the time. He may be a migrant worker, adapting to the dominant culture enough to survive, e.g., he knows not to cross the street on a red light, understands the difference between the men’s and women’s restrooms and realizes that when a siren blares he should get his car out of the way.

In Which Culture Is the Church?

As you look at the culture diagram, in which culture do you think most inner-city churches fall? People usually agree that most churches fit squarely in the C₂ culture, and are often striving to move toward C₃ culture. Even though many urban Anglos, African Americans, Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans are C₁, C₁ evangelical churches are few and far between, leaving millions of people unchurched.



Looking back on my original experience with urban churches, the cultural differences make C₁ believers hesitant about joining C₂ congregations. The C₁ Christians felt out of place. They did not wear the appropriate clothing and did not know the rituals or enjoy the length of the service. C₁ believers found the cultural change so great that integrating was difficult.

It would be a great cultural leap for a Baptist, like me, to feel immediately comfortable in a liturgical service, like those enjoyed by the Lutherans or Episcopalians. Yet neither culture is better than the other. Both have great value.

Culturally Comfortable Churches Needed

World Impact ministers to the urban poor, who are primarily in the C₁ culture. We were not initially successful in developing great numbers of indigenous leaders in the inner city because we made one of two mistakes:

1. If a C₁ accepted Christ, we encouraged her to go to a C₂ church (change cultures) in order to grow in her Christian faith.

$$C_1 \xrightarrow{\text{change}} C_2 = \text{Christian}$$

2. Or if a C_1 became a Christian and had a great potential, we encouraged him to go to a school like Wheaton College or Gordon Seminary to prepare himself to minister. However, few C_3 institutions equip their students to minister in the inner city.

$$C_1 \xrightarrow{\text{change}} C_3 = \text{Christian}$$

Although we did not specifically say it, we strongly implied that it was impossible to be a C_1 and a Christian. We left the C_1 believer with no option other than to change cultures if he were going to become a mature believer. We did not understand that we had fallen in the Apostle Peter's trap of forcing a believer to conform to a culture instead of conforming to Christ (Gal. 2.11-14).

This situation parallels what the New Testament Church faced when the Apostle Paul started to evangelize Gentiles. Initially, the Jerusalem Church assumed that a Gentile had to become a Jew (be circumcised and observe the Jewish dietary laws) in order to become a Christian.

$$\text{Gentile Believer} \xrightarrow{\text{change}} \text{Jew} = \text{Christian}$$

But the Holy Spirit must have caused uneasiness about this mandatory cultural change for church membership because the church leaders called the Council of Jerusalem to determine the propriety of forcing a Gentile to become a Jew in order to become a Christian (Acts 15).

At Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit revealed to these Christian leaders that it was unnecessary for a Gentile to change cultures in order to become a Christian: a Gentile did not have to become a Jew in order to be accepted into the Church. God meets people in the culture in which he finds them.

$$\text{Gentile Believer} \xrightarrow{\text{change}} \cancel{\text{Jew}} = \text{Christian}$$

It *was* possible to be both a Gentile and a Christian.

Gentile Believer = Christian

The C₁ culture is neither more sinful nor more godly than the C₂ or C₃ cultures—God and his Gospel are culturally neutral. While the Gospel works in all cultures, the economic status of C₁ believers, and their acceptance by society in general, closely parallels the status, and society’s reception, of early Christians.

This biblical principle of cultural neutrality, which encouraged indigenous leadership in every culture, allowed the Gospel of Christ to become universally applicable. It set the stage for the Church’s world wide missionary efforts. Soon Philip and Paul began to evangelize and plant churches among non-Jewish peoples who had never heard of Christ.³ Their example is relevant to our inner-city ministry today.

Just as it was wrong to force a Gentile (an African, Greek or Roman) to become a Jew in order to follow Jesus, it is equally wrong to force, either consciously or subconsciously, a C₁ African American, Hispanic American, Asian American or Anglo to change cultures—to become a C₂ or C₃—in order to become a believer.

$$C_1 \xrightarrow{\text{change}} C_2 C_3 = \text{Christian}$$

New Christians must have the option of remaining C₁ and being Christians.

$$C_1 = \text{Christian}$$

If all C₁ believers leave their culture, the C₁ culture will never be influenced for Christ. No Christians will be left here to reproduce themselves and teach

³ Paul (a C₂) was adept at crossing cultures and facilitating multiple cultures to become one in Christ. Romans 16.22 and 24 say, “I, Tertius (a slave, whose name was ‘Three’ [Romans numbered their slaves]—a C₁, who physically wrote this letter), greet you in the Lord. [24] Erastus (C₂), who is the city’s director of public works (City Treasurer of Corinth), and our brother Quartus (a slave whose name was ‘Four’) send you their greetings.” Seasoned World Impact missionaries, and their children who grow up in the inner city, often find themselves becoming C₂’s as well, for Christ’s sake.

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others. For the Church to gain a stronghold among the urban poor, C₁ believers must stay and transform the neighborhoods where they were living when they met Jesus.

We encourage new believers to worship in evangelical C₁ churches if they exist in the community. Or, if C₁ converts choose to change cultures and become part of a biblically sound C₂ or C₃ church, we support them, but they must not be forced to change cultures in order to become Christians.

However, in the absence of those options, World Impact disciples indigenous C₁ leaders and plants inner-city churches. This allows C₁ Christians to remain in their culture, live for Christ there, and reach many more C₁ city dwellers for our Lord.⁴

A Dream Becomes a Reality

Once we understood that we should plant culturally comfortable churches for the urban poor, we committed to studying missiology and Church history in order to learn from others who had planted churches among the urban poor. We then began to pray that God would bless us to effectively plant thousands of churches in our inner cities.

Transitioning from whole-person discipleship to church planting was a bud maturing into a blossom for World Impact, the natural culmination of 25 years of service. Every ministry we have launched (Bible clubs, Bible studies, job training, clinics, housing, schools, camps, etc.) naturally leads to, and is enhanced by, the planting of healthy, indigenous bodies of Christ among the urban poor.

The Church, the Bride of Christ, is the only place where fruit from urban evangelism can be secured. Further, incorporating believers into Christ's body is the only way to *set people free*.

⁴ *God calls some C₁ Christians to become C₂'s in order to equip them for missionary work. They are the exception, not the rule.*

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Church plants have begun in several of the cities where we minister. Victories have been won as people and neighborhoods have been changed. However, we are not satisfied. We are motivated to press forward from a few communities to entire cities. We expect to see an explosion of new churches guided by dynamic, urban leaders.

Summary: World Impact's strategy to make God known (Matt. 28.18-20).

1. Evangelism (Col. 4.3-6; 2 Tim. 4.2).
2. Follow Up (1 Tim. 4.12; 2 Tim. 2.2; Rom. 1.11).
3. Discipleship (Matt. 28.18-29; John 8.31).
4. Church Planting (1 Cor. 3.10; Acts 13, 16).