

The Future of Urban Life in America

A Pronouncement Approved by General Synod XIII (1981)

Summary

The United Church of Christ has a tradition of concern for urban America. Recent developments intensify the need for commitment to our cities and their future. Cities have continued to deteriorate and urban sprawl to intensify. Newer cities seem relatively strong, but reveal the same basic maldistribution of economic resources and racial injustices which have marred the older cities. The citizens of our cities are often unable to participate fully in decisions that directly affect their lives. Many churches, including the United Church of Christ, have lost much of their presence in the core cities, which has weakened involvement in urban problems. These reasons and others led the Twelfth General Synod to request the Board for Homeland Ministries to prepare a pronouncement on "The Future of Urban Life in America."

This pronouncement was prepared by a Task Force appointed by the United Church Board for Homeland Ministries in response to the request of the General Synod. The Task Force met periodically for over a year to study and reflect on the future of our cities. "Soundings" were held in four cities to test the perceptions of the Task Force against the views of people living in cities. A Biblical/Theological background paper was prepared by Dr. Douglas Meeks. Social policy positions and statements of urban concern by the UCC and other denominations were examined. An analysis of the present situation and the future of our cities was made by the Task Force. In considering the reality of urbanization in our society we perceive the city in different ways. On the one hand, when we consider the specific realities of urban life, we are dealing with a concrete entity. In this sense, "a city" is by its nature a diverse plurality of persons in an organized system, interdependent with its surrounding area and people.

The Task Force concluded that cities will continue to play a primary role in our nation's life. They may not be so large or so concentrated as in the past, but they will continue to be a major focus of intellectual vitality, cultural life, communication and commercial life. Cities will continue to be the entry point for immigrants as they begin a new life in America. Cities will continue to have concentrations of power-deprived people such as: minorities, immigrants, elderly, and poor who are excluded from meaningful participation in our society.

The United Church of Christ is called upon to recommit itself to address the city's current ills; to stand in solidarity with the disinherited who are concentrated in our cities and to share their suffering; to work for the liberation of the people in our cities from economic and social oppression; and to raise again the hope for a more just future.

Theological Background

According to the biblical faith, God's history with the creation begins in the Garden but ends in the City. The salvation of the whole creation does not take place through a return to the beginning but through God's New Creation of everything in the New City without tears and without the forces of evil and death (Rev. 21). In the New Creation the Church will no longer be necessary because "the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" will be present in the City (Rev. 21:22). Thus biblical faith claims that the church exists for the future of God's New City and for the formation of the human city today.

The Bible sees the "city" clearly in all of its ambiguity. The "city" is both a symbol for what destroys the human future and for the divine human cooperation which makes possible a human future.

On the one hand, the city is viewed as the epitome of human rebellion against God. Cain, a murderer, builds the first city. He is unwilling to live in God's creation under the providence of God. So he builds his own "counter-creation," a city with fortified walls, in order to secure himself. The Bible understands the constant human tendency to build "closed cities." The city seems to be born of the compulsion to security and greed in the political, economic, psychological and cultural dimensions of life. Thus the city constantly produces the false religion of worshipping the products of the human mind and hands, segregation among its peoples, exploitation of work, domination and destruction of nature, the arsenals for war and the squalor of poverty. The city, which is intended to secure the human being, instead denies some people adequate food, clean water, shelter, education, jobs and the dignity they need to be human beings. It is no wonder then that the Bible recalls that Israel's first historical appearance is in a city – as slaves building the store cities of Pharaoh. Through the prophets God judges and condemns the city for its inhumanity to the least of God's children, for its destruction of the creation and for its being closed to God's righteousness and justice.

On the other hand, the Biblical traditions see the city as part of the human condition. The city, with its memories, languages, communications, sciences, arts, technologies, and large organizations is the means chosen by humanity to fulfill the task of being God's representatives or stewards: the "economists" to God's creation. As a primary center of human power and policy, it is in the cities that the impact of humanity on the future of the whole creation is decided. All persons are thus related to the city: positively or negatively, for life or life's destruction. In this sense, rural people more closely connected with the land are also "city" people.

As is clear in the prophets and the New Testament, the city takes on increasing importance in God's history with the creation. *God judges the city.* Because it perverts God's justice and destroys the lives of God's little ones, the city hears the worst threat conceivable for a city – that it will be uninhabited. In our time when people are turning their backs on the city, especially the inner city, as the place of crime, poverty, ignorance and pollution, and when nuclear warheads are aimed at almost all major cities, this judgment of the city is plain.

God calls God's people to love and to suffer with the city and stand in solidarity with it. God commands that we stay and work for the welfare of the city in which we shall find our own Welfare (Jer. 29:4-7). Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem (Lk. 9:51). There seems to be a theological necessity for God's story to find its climax in (Lk. 13:33). God's passion for the whole world comes to its fullest expression in the city. Jesus grieves for and suffers with the city (Lk. 13:34; 19:41). Though grief and pathetic solidarity with the city look like sheer vulnerability, they are the first signs that we may not dispose of the city but that God's election and redemption of the city will come about through God's own suffering love. *God liberates God's people from the city for the sake of the city.* Through the self-giving grace of God in Jesus Christ persons and institutions can be freed from using the city as a means of security, self-justification and greed. Freed by the power of the gospel from the fear of death and from guilt, persons can give their lives in solidarity with the victims of the city. Liberation from the powers of the city does not mean fleeing the city but rather investing oneself fully in it, for "the name of the city henceforth shall be, the LORD is there" (Ezek 48:35b, cf. Jer. 33:16). The place which the human being wanted to close up for self-protection against God is now opened up by God's own identification with the city's poor and powerless people.

God hopes for the city. The biblical traditions witness that God does not give up hope for the city. Because of that the human being may stay in hope for the city. God promises the new creation of the

city, the city in which God will rejoice (Is. 65:17-19). In the coming city “they shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days. . .” (Is. 65:22, 20). Through the power of the Holy Spirit the Church is called to bring God’s New City into our city.

Current Realities

The decline of the city is reflected in the present reality and predictable future of our cities. The physical infrastructures of our older cities, such as streets, sewers and water systems are deteriorating, as are the mass transportation systems. In the future we will face the need for massive investment for the replacement of these systems.

Industrial plants are moving out of core cities, with a resulting loss of employment for low skilled workers. High rates of unemployment, especially among minority youth, threaten future wellbeing. We may be creating a permanent urban underclass.

Fiscal problems continue to mount in the cities as the tax base erodes and the cost of services to an increasingly disadvantaged population escalates. Cities have become increasingly dependent on external fiscal support.

Crime and fear of violence have become major concerns. Cities no longer serve to the degree that they once did as positive symbols of our culture. Negative images of urban life, always an element of the American consciousness, have been intensified.

Development of selected areas of central cities for affluent residents continues, threatening low income and minority families with displacement. These developments are providing islands of affluence in the cities, which contrast vividly with the majority of disadvantaged residents.

Rehabilitation of the cities and the liberation of its people will require economic investment and social change. The American democratic experiment has provided large personal liberties. However, it has not met, to the same degree, fundamental economic and social needs, particularly of certain segments of our society. Our cities are filled with people who have inadequate access to education, good food, safety, and economic opportunity. The ability of many people to find employment is denied because of structural rigidities and failures in our economic system. Dramatic change is called for.

A new commitment to overcome racism is required, as is the fashioning of a new pluralism responsive to the needs and concerns of peoples such as: Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and new immigrants. Though in recent years important gains in civil rights have been made, injustices toward minorities continue. Several examples illustrate the problems. From 1955 to 1978, unemployment among Blacks has remained at levels twice as high as for Whites. For Hispanics, the unemployment is only slightly lower. Segregation by housing persists, and even increases. A study by the Urban Institute indicated that the percentage of urban Blacks living in racially integrated neighborhoods actually declined from 15.8% in 1960 to 13.5% in 1978. Desegregation of urban school districts continues to meet resistance. There is evidence that the movement toward parity of income between minority and White families, which began in the late 1960’s, has been reversed in the 1970’s. Liberation from racism remains a goal to be achieved in our nation’s cities.

Effective citizen participation is required if the needs of our cities are to be met. Yet many barriers to citizen participation exists, including the often unwieldy size of urban political units, the precarious existence of many residents, and the lack of effective organization. These barriers have often led to a

sense of apathy and powerlessness. But effective citizen participation is possible and should be supported. American history is rich with examples of citizen participation in voluntary associations. These can serve as models for future action. New and more effective models wait to be born. Citizen participation, particularly the building and strengthening of community based organizations, is a critical element in the revitalization of our cities.

The church must play a major role in the cities' renewal. We recognize that the United Church of Christ generally is not represented by large numbers of congregations in our central cities. For example, a Gallup Poll completed in 1980 indicated that only 7.7% of UCC members lived in cities of over one million people. This was the smallest percentage of any major denomination. Furthermore, our urban congregations are declining in number. In 1960, there were 303 UCC congregations in the 10 largest cities. By 1971, only 218 remained in those same cities, a decline of 28%. A new commitment to founding new congregations and renewing existing congregations in urban settings is an essential element of contemporary mission.

Urban congregations can be valuable resources to their neighborhoods. Many UCC congregations are providing space for child care and other services, and providing leadership in community affairs. Others, however, are isolated because of racial or class changes in their immediate neighborhood. The future of urban life will be stronger if urban congregations become centers of community within their neighborhoods, providing leadership and resources to meet personal and community needs.

Further, the United Church of Christ will need to find imaginative ways to compensate for its minimal institutional visibility in the cities providing specialized ministries and resources for mission. Members of the United Church of Christ are present in institutions, both private and public, which impact urban life. In an interdependent, highly organized society, this fact provides United Church of Christ members with numerous possibilities for effective involvement. New structures for mission may be necessary, which can build upon a heritage of urban mission exemplified in City Missionary Societies, the Minister of Metropolitan Mission program, settlement houses, and others.

Policy Recommendations

It is recommended that the following criteria be endorsed and utilized as policy guidelines for the United Church of Christ in dealing with Urban Life in America.

A. Recommendations on Public Policy

1. The churches are called to challenge the maldistribution of economic resources in our society, particularly as this maldistribution manifests itself most visibly in the "core cities" of our nation.
2. The churches are called to work with concerned organizations and institutions, public and private, that seek to eliminate; (a) inflation, (b) unemployment and underemployment, (c) inadequate housing, (d) unfair taxation, (e) the financial plight of those incapable of self-support, (f) substandard health care, and (g) environmental and attitudinal barriers to persons with disabilities.
3. The churches are called upon to reaffirm support for existing civil rights legislation, including legislation pertaining to disabilities and efforts on the part of the federal government to implement its intentions to achieve integrated quality education, open housing, fair employment, voting rights and equal access to public accommodations. We deplore any policy of abrogation or "benign neglect" which may reverse gains thus far achieved in this area and call on the churches vigilantly to support programs that take action to achieve full racial justice and civil rights in our society.

4. We believe that the rebuilding of our cities is a major responsibility of all levels of government, the business-industrial community, voluntary associations, the churches and individual citizens. Programs to rebuild our cities should insure that the rights and needs of the poor and powerless living in our cities are both protected and met. All people must have a voice in making decisions affecting their welfare. Therefore, we support the establishment of citizen-based structures to monitor the performance of public and private agencies responsible for the rebuilding of our cities.
5. Many problems confronting our cities appear insoluble because of the absence of fiscal and political structures which encompass both the central city and its surrounding suburbs. We recognize the interdependence of city and suburb and the need for cooperative action. We affirm a creative role for state and federal governments in dealing more effectively with urban problems which extend beyond municipal boundaries.
6. We believe that the federal budget should reflect a high priority for the restoration of our cities and the well being of the people living there and deplore the current administration's move to reduce further federal support for urban areas.
7. In a time of severe economic dislocation, we urge the nation to explore potential alternative economic arrangements which may better solve the problems of people in our cities. Examples might include cooperatives and community based economic development.

B. *Recommendations to the Churches*

1. We affirm our commitment to achieve the full integration of membership in our local congregations, respecting and expanding upon the traditions inherent in such churches. The integration of our congregations should not only reflect and appreciate the diversity of racial and ethnic groups, but also the diversity of disabilities, life styles, age and family groupings, educational and socioeconomic backgrounds and members.
2. Urban congregations are a primary leadership resource for their neighborhoods. As such, they are called to minister to the needs of the poor and the power deprived, to work for the empowerment of new immigrants, to develop strategies of action to meet neighborhood needs and to be the meeting house of the community where issues of concern to residents can be raised and strategies for action taken.
3. The responsibility for the empowerment of local congregations in our core cities is a continuing responsibility of the larger church. City churches, particularly those in changing communities, are often unable to engage in necessary mission without support of the denomination. To empower such congregations in mission, a number of strategies and courses of action are suggested:
 - (a) The continued development of para-congregational strategies such as, specialized urban ministries, metropolitan area mission strategies and the support of community based organizations.
 - (b) Specialized training for urban ministries, both in our theological seminaries and denominational agencies.
 - (c) The enlargement of resources for action by working ecumenically and in coalitions when engaged in mission to the city.
4. Through the careful use of existing and developing church extension and evangelism programs, the Conferences and Instrumentalities of the United Church of Christ should be ready to strengthen and increase the number of urban congregations, particularly congregations that serve minority and new immigrant groups.