

TRINITY LECTURE 1 - Ministry Amongst the Urban Poor

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Preacher: David Williams

[0 : 00] Thank you and thank you for your welcome and for inviting me to share with you this evening. I'm hoping that we're going to have some pictures scrolling through.

My talk is not kind of directly linked to the pictures, but there are some images that will be, I hope, showing on the screen there that show different pictures of slums in Nairobi.

So they'll give you a kind of immediate image of what we're talking about. And the subject that I'm wanting to explore and for us to think about is the subject of mission amongst the urban poor.

And the focus is going to be particularly on people living in cities who are in slums, people living in slums. There are different politically correct words for the slums.

Shanty towns, informal settlements is probably the flavour of the day, but shanty towns, barrios, favelas, ghettos and so on. I wonder how big you think that problem is.

[1 : 05] Well, the world's population is around about 6.7 billion people. And more than half of those people in 2008 now live in cities.

And the percentage of people that live in cities is now increasing day by day. More and more people moving into cities, fewer and fewer people living in the countryside. And in the developing world, in cities of Latin America, Asia, Southeast Asia and Africa, many of those city dwellers live in slums.

In Africa, as many as 70% of city dwellers live in slums. Probably one-sixth of the entire population of the world, over one billion people, live in slums or informal settlements.

And of those one billion slum dwellers, nearly half of them are 25 years old or younger. But statistics are boring, so let me tell you a story instead.

Let me tell you a story of a friend of mine called Washira. Washira was born in a slum in Nairobi. His father abandoned his mother when he was small.

[2 : 30] And so he and his brothers and sisters were brought up in a single-parent home. Washira's mother tried to earn a living by selling food at a kind of small stall, just a few stones thrown together at the side of the road.

But she struggled to make ends meet. Washira would have grown up in a single-roomed house that would be the size of maybe a quarter of the dais that I'm standing on here.

The walls were made of mud and sticks. The floor was mud. And the roof was made of corrugated iron sheeting. There was no electricity and no running water.

Or except when it rained. There was running water when it rained. Washira and his family would have to buy water from standpipes in the street, paying 20 times more than middle-class people living in ordinary houses.

They and their family shared one long drop pit latrine with around 400 other people. In the slum in Nairobi where Washira grew up, it's been shown by the United Nations that there are more churches than there are toilets.

[3 : 49] In the middle of the muddy path outside of Washira's house, there's an open sewer that winds its way through the slums. Washira's mother would throw all her household rubbish out into this stinking stream.

And when the rains came, the rubbish would be washed away. But like almost all slum dwellers in Nairobi, these properties were owned by landlords.

Washira's family had to pay rent for this shack that they lived in. And their landlord was one of the local politicians. If you failed to pay your rent, you were given a strict warning and told to pay up within one month.

If you didn't pay within the month, you would come home and find that all your possessions had been sold, the property had been padlocked up and was going to be rented to someone else. And you would be left standing in the street with only the clothes on your back. Washira's mother saved the little money that she had to try and send Washira and his brothers to school.

[5 : 02] But she couldn't afford to send his sisters. So Washira attended an informal school in the slum, not registered with the government, but providing slum kids with some kind of opportunity to learn to read and write.

There'd be maybe 60 children in a class reciting the alphabet by rote. And being ruled by the rod. The fees were maybe \$2 a month, which doesn't sound much.

But Washira would often miss a month of school because his mum couldn't afford to pay.

Secondary school was way out of reach. By the time he was a teenager, he spent most of his time with a gang of other youngsters, picking rubbish off the huge city trash heap.

At Dandora, the landfill site for the whole of Nairobi. Where Washira and his friends would pick through the rubbish looking for glass bottles, scrap metal, plastic bottles, plastic bags, anything that they could sell in order to earn a few shillings.

The Swahili word for street children is a similar word for rubbish. And these young people had become rubbish in the society as they stood on the rubbish heap and lived off its pickings.

[6 : 28] That is what life is like for maybe one in 12 people in our planet. Now people living in slums in developing countries face many challenges.

And one of the principal challenges that they face relates to unemployment. On any one day, as many as 50% of people living in slums, certainly in Nairobi, may be unemployed.

I say on any one day because on the next day there'll still be 50% unemployment, but it'll be a different 50%. Because most people living in slums are casual labourers.

Just like the labourers in the vineyard in Jesus' parable. Each morning they wake up, they'll walk to the factories or the building sites and they'll hope for work.

If the foreman lets them in, then they'll get paid a day's wage, maybe a dollar or two. But if they're unlucky, then there's no work and they walk home and their family doesn't eat.

[7 : 41] That kind of poverty leads to a sense of hopelessness and despair. A despair that is expressed in things like alcohol abuse, drug abuse, domestic violence, sexual immorality, promiscuity, prostitution, theft and violence.

And all of those things are symptoms of one of the deepest underlying problems that faces the slums, which is a loss of community.

In many developing countries, cities are a new phenomenon. A phenomenon of only the last 100 years or so. In Africa, as in many developing countries, community relationships are based on a strong understanding of kinship in a rural or a village setting.

So in a typical African village, everyone knows everyone else. Children are raised surrounded by a network of grandparents, aunties and uncles and cousins.

And those extended family networks in African villages are extremely powerful and well understood. But when people move into the cities, they move with their nuclear family, not with their extended family.

[9 : 07] And so in the huge slums of Nairobi or Cairo or Lagos or Manila or Mumbai, these are places with fractured or limited sense of community.

Very different to the villages that surround them. What's the role of government in these slum communities?

Well, we live in a culture where we make a set of assumptions about things like unemployment and poverty and health care.

Our countries have a welfare system. And so we make an assumption that it is government's responsibility to provide for those who are unemployed. We assume that it is the government's responsibility to care for the sick who cannot otherwise afford treatment.

These welfare issues, we feel, are the concern of government. But when you look at the slums in Nairobi or Mumbai, our reaction is to expect the Kenyan or the Indian government to do something about it.

[10 : 18] But that expectation is entirely unrealistic. Unrealistic for two reasons. The first reason is simply down to a lack of resources.

In many developing countries, there is a lack of political will to solve the problem of urban slums. A lack of political will that relates to macroeconomic factors.

In an economy where the vast majority of the workforce labour manually and are poorly paid, there is a need for a large supply of cheap housing.

And to unscramble that whole macroeconomic structure has proved largely to be beyond the ability of many developing country governments.

But the second and more immediate reason relates to systemic corruption. In many slums, the landlords are the politicians or the local chief or the local police.

[11 : 29] They earn a good living by renting out slum properties. And they never have any problems with disgruntled tenants taking them to court. The corruption in slums runs right through the whole structure.

And many slums are controlled by a kind of gang culture. A gang underclass. In Kibera Slum in Nairobi, where Rachel and I were working, one of the local Roman Catholic churches did some social analysis, trying to look at the problems that people were facing.

And they identified illegally brewed alcohol as a major disrupting factor in their community. They started off wondering if they could stop this alcohol from being brewed.

But they discovered that it wasn't being distilled within the slum. It was being distilled in vast containers in warehouses in the industrial area.

So then they wondered about the possibility of disrupting the supply of illegally brewed alcohol into the slum. When they investigated that, they discovered that the supply chain was actually run by the police force using police vehicles.

[12 : 51] So in Kenya, the most corrupt office bearers are first of all politicians and then the police, the judiciary feature in the top five.

Looking for government solutions to the problem of slums, at least at the moment in the short term, is proving unrealistic. Another set of organisations who have struggled to make an impact in the slums are the NGOs or development organisations.

And the problem here is not down to corruption or lack of will, but because of this issue of community that I mentioned earlier. Most development organisations use a model of community development, and rightly so.

They aim to work with communities to help the people solve the problems that they face. One of the problems of many slums is that community doesn't exist.

Or if it does exist, it exists in fragmentary, shifting alliances that can change almost on a daily basis. One NGO in Nairobi investigated a great deal of time and energy and money into building proper pit latrines in one of the slums, building proper toilets.

[14 : 18] In the particular slum that they were working in, there were so few toilets that people had to use plastic bags, which they then threw onto open rubbish heaps, coining the phrase, flying toilets.

The NGO built some fantastic, properly constructed pit latrines, and then handed them over to the local community. But a couple of months later, when I visited the place, I found that the local chief had locked up the toilets and was charging people to use them, thus creating a neat income-generating project for himself.

I watched a five-year-old child defecate into a plastic bag right next to these brand-new pit latrines, with its doors padlocked shut. NGOs that come into slums from outside have struggled to make a significant impact on the living conditions and the quality of life of slum dwellers.

NGOs that arise from inside slums have tried to make an impact, but struggle to raise the resources that they need.

One agency that is often overlooked in slums and informal settlements is the agency of the church. And the reason that churches are often ignored is because, with the exception of the Roman Catholic Church, the majority denominations find it very difficult to engage in ministry in slums at all.

[16 : 00] But that is not to say that the slums are devoid of churches. In East Africa, that is certainly not the case. Many slums around the world are full of churches, full of Pentecostal or local indigenous congregations.

Slum religion often veers towards fundamentalism. And it's well recognised that slums in Islamic cities have proved to be fertile recruiting grounds for extreme Islam, such as Al-Qaeda.

But slum Christianity has also tended to extremism. And many slum churches have fallen prey to the confusions and heresies of prosperity theology.

In Kibera, the largest slum in Africa, there are over 700 churches. Many of these are tiny, perhaps congregations of 30 or 40 people.

They meet in tin shacks and many of them listen week in, week out to prosperity teaching. Now, it may surprise you that prosperity theology is so widespread amongst such a poor group of people.

[17 : 19] But what other hope do these people have? The churches preach a message that tells people that they need to be born again. And it tells them that once they're born again, they can expect God to bless them and they can expect that blessing to come in material ways through finding a job, through being healed of all illnesses and so on.

The work that Rachel and I have been involved in has been all about trying to help these churches in informal settlements to find a different solution to urban poverty other than prosperity theology. And the solution that we've been looking at exploring is something that I want to call holistic church. I'm beginning to wonder whether the whole debate about holistic mission isn't something of a red herring.

And I want to suggest that we might be better to focus instead on the idea of holistic church or holistic community. The Bible tells us the story of God's rescue plan, a story that starts at creation with God creating the cosmos and then symbolically dwelling within it in the first temple, the Garden of Eden.

Eden is pictured as a garden temple where God walks back and forth and meets with Adam. The Bible story then ends with the whole cosmos becoming God's dwelling place, a dwelling place that is described as a temple city that also sounds like a garden with its rivers and trees and streams.

[19 : 07] In between Genesis and Revelation we have the story of God's rescue plan, God's mission to rescue his people from the consequences of Adam's rebellion.

And as you read that story of God's mission through the pages of the Bible, your attention is drawn time and time again to God working to build a community of people for himself.

So God calls Abraham in Genesis 12 not just for Abraham, not just for his family, but so that Abraham will be the father of a great nation through whom God will bring his blessing to all the nations of the earth.

God then is at work to create the nation of Israel with the intention as we've seen of blessing the whole world through Israel. When we turn to the New Testament we find that Jesus fulfills in himself all the promises and all the expectations that we've related to the temple and to the nation.

Jesus is the temple. He is where we go to meet God and he is the true Israel. He creates the new Israel, the new people of God.

[20 : 30] First he makes our identity possible through his atoning death on the cross. Then his spirit grows and builds communities of Christian people.

So through the Lord Jesus and through his atoning death we the church are now a holy nation, a royal priesthood. In Christ we are the dwelling place of God.

And as we read through our New Testaments we see God's rescue plan being fulfilled in the Lord Jesus and then being committed to his people, the church.

God's strategy for mission is his people, the church. Page after page after page of the New Testament is all about the faith and life of the local church.

And I don't think that there's any great controversy in suggesting that the life of the local church is intended to be holistic. God gives a wide variety of gifts to his church.

[21 : 39] church. We look at the model of church planting, church growth and church life that is demonstrated to us in the New Testament.

What do we learn? Well we see that both amongst the Jews and amongst the Gentiles the apostles were eager to remember the poor as they spread the gospel.

We see the very first churches ensuring that widows and orphans from different ethnic groups are cared for. We see over and over again that the holiness of God's people worked out in the context of their day-to-day relationships with one another is a matter of critical concern.

We see that as God's people we are called to proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness into light. But just a few verses later we are to keep our conduct amongst the Gentiles honourable so that they may see our good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

We are called to love one another practically sacrificially and completely. helping informal settlement churches to understand these things helps them to see that there is a better way apart from prosperity theology.

[23 : 11] The college that I worked in in Nairobi set up a training centre in the middle of Kibera Slum with the aim of training pastors and church leaders from these slum churches trying to help them to see that their churches could make a difference for the lives of the people within their congregation and could be a witness to those outside.

One of the first courses that we launched offered church leaders training about how they as a congregation might respond to the challenge of HIV and AIDS and immediately we ran into the challenge of prosperity theology.

In the first group of pastors and church leaders that we trained all of them believed that HIV was a curse from God against sinners.

So they reasoned if you are a Christian it is not possible to have AIDS and if you do have AIDS the solution is to be converted and so to be healed.

They would not believe that there could be a problem of HIV inside their own congregations. Now that attitude may seem unbelievable to you but it combines not only the problem of bad theology the problem of prosperity theology but it combines with that a whole set of cultural taboos relating to sexuality along with deep and ingrained attitudes of stigma and discrimination.

[24 : 56] We struggled to convince these church leaders that the issue of HIV was of any relevance to their congregations. The breaking point came when we invited all of them to take an HIV test because of course they would be negative.

We passed around a piece of paper asking them to sign up and give their consent and when the sheet of paper had gone round the room and had come back to us there was not a single name written on it.

Suddenly reality broke through the stigma and the taboo. That first HIV course led on to a series of training programs grassroots courses in things like simple discipleship understanding the Bible micro enterprise skills skills in church leadership and management and as we engaged in teaching really very simple truths about the Bible we discovered once again the power of God's word in situations where God's word had been little understood.

I remember teaching a group of students from Ephesians 4 about the nature of Christian ministry and explaining that in Ephesians 4 God gives some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists and some to be pastors and teachers so that God's people might be equipped for ministry.

Ministry, I said, belongs to the church members and the job of the leadership is to equip the Christians to get on with the work.

[26 : 48] These pastors had never heard that before. They were amazed. They'd been labouring under a burden in which they felt that their job was to do everything.

And when they went away and taught that message to the Christians in their congregation, the transformation of that simple little message that you are all so familiar with, I'm sure, was extraordinarily powerful.

And over the years we've started to see churches working together to support one another, for the Christians to support one another to address the challenges they face.

One church helped a group of women from within the congregation to set up businesses selling second-hand clothes. Another church got a group of its members together to start making soap and selling it.

Another church started visiting people who were suffering from AIDS in their homes and offering them practical care. the extraordinary thing that these churches experienced was when they started doing that, when they started demonstrating the love of Christ, then suddenly the gospel they preached was preached with more power, because it was seen to be true.

[28 : 16] That was certainly Washerah's experience, the person whose story I started with.

Washerah was found on this rubbish tip by a church leader who took him into his home and started pastoring him and training him.

He helped him to get through some form of secondary education and this guy Washerah is now a pastor and a church leader in one of the slums himself.

His life has been transformed as he has been taught God's word and as he has seen it lived out in the context of a holistic community.

As I draw to a close, what lessons might we in rich and comfortable Melbourne learn from all of this? Well, I hope I've encouraged you to think about urban poverty mission as a priority mission field and to commit to praying for that area of ministry.

But let me suggest four possible lessons that we might want to learn for ourselves and for our own churches that come out of all of this. The first is to say that our churches need to be places of genuine community.

[29 : 40] The challenge of broken communities is perhaps nearly as great for us in big western cities as it is for people living in slums.

I wonder whether you know all your neighbours. I certainly don't know all of mine. We live in an extremely individualistic culture and building community is extremely challenging but community is what the church is and building that community is fundamental to who we are.

So we need to create community but secondly we need to ensure that those communities care compassionately for one another. Our churches, our communities need to be places where we care compassionately.

sacrificially for one another as part of every member ministry. How much do the Christians in your church know about you?

How much do you care for them? How much care do you receive from them? How compassionate would an outsider find your community to be if he or she walked into it?

[31 : 07] church leaders need to understand the challenges that their congregation members are facing.

Certainly in Nairobi church leaders were extremely disconnected from the day-to-day lives that their church members were living and they had a very limited understanding of the challenges that people were living in.

Particularly in the areas which were taboo or which were under some form of stigma or discrimination. We need to confront those taboos.

I wonder what the taboos are in Melbourne. Probably relating to sexuality, promiscuity, prostitution and pornography.

I wonder if church leaders know whether church members are struggling with those issues. Whether they've ever asked those kinds of questions.

[32 : 16] Asking those kinds of questions in your church would be every bit as hard as it would for a church leader in Nairobi to ask about HIV and AIDS.

But until we break through, until we reach reality, we won't be equipping one another truly to serve and truly to follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

So let's work to create true Christian communities, communities that care passionately for one another and that truly understand the challenges that we live by day by day.

Why don't I pray and then we'll have time for questions. Let's pray together. Father, our hearts go out to so many people who tonight are living in slums or informal settlements across the world.

Perhaps as many as one in six of every person on this planet. Father, that's too much for our minds to comprehend, but it's not too much for you to understand, nor is it too much for you to care about.

[33 : 36] So we pray that you as a compassionate and sovereign God would help Christian people to care for one another in these kinds of communities, and so to demonstrate the love of the Lord Jesus Christ, that many more might come to know you, and so be saved.

We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.