

# Training Students to Exegete the City: Using Ethnography to Explore and Evangelize Diverse Urban Cultures

by John Fuder (May, 2003)

It was years ago that I was engrossed in the final rewrite of my doctoral dissertation at Biola University[i]. With a handful of graduate and undergraduate students, I had immersed myself in ethnographic research among the homeless, gangs, and prostitutes in Los Angeles' skid row. Inspired by the writings of "the guru" of ethnography (the work of describing a culture), James Spradley,[ii] I was intent on exposing and equipping students to minister compassionately among these subcultures.

Anthropologists like Spradley, et. al[iii] had been my theoretical stimulus and I had discovered the usefulness of this technique to decipher other cultures. But the missing ingredient was the "so what" question, the theological framework and motivation around which to design ministry in those audiences. I was so very grateful for the inspiration and expertise of my mentors, Drs. Sherwood and Judy Lingenfelter,[iv] and was eagerly setting my sights to teach at Moody Bible Institute and explore the diversity of Chicago with my students.

Another voice that echoed loudly in my heart during that season of preparation and learning was that of Leith Anderson.[v] In a lectureship series at Dallas he stated, "effective practitioners of ministry for the 21st Century should be as adept at the hermeneutics of culture as they are at the hermeneutics of the Scriptures." His appeal was "to combine ethnology (the study of culture or ethnicity) with exegesis," particularly in North America, "an encyclopedia of every ethnic group in the world."

He articulated so clearly what has been my burden and focus at Moody for the past decade. Living, worshipping, raising my family, assisting in church planting, and walking with my students in the rich milieu of the city and its cultures. The world lives in Chicago, as it does in every major city in the United States. A recent article in the Chicago Tribune[vi] announces Illinois as the most religiously pluralistic state in America and Chicago is at the heart of that diversity.[vii]

A sobering, yet tremendously inspiring book, co-authored by Tom Clegg and Warren Bird,[viii] offers this startling glimpse of "a typical day in the United States [in which]... 411 Americans will convert to the Muslim faith, 872 will become Mormons, and 8 churches will close their doors for the last time." Kent Hunter,[ix] in a similarly stirring book, bluntly proclaims that "the unchurched population in the United States is so extensive that if it were a nation it would be the fifth most populated on the planet... our unchurched population is the largest mission field in the English-speaking world."

Ray Bakke[x] has been reminding us for years that "mission is no longer about crossing the oceans, jungles and deserts, but about crossing the streets of the world's cities." So we have committed to crossing Chicago's streets into the laboratory of cultural diversity, using ethnography to exegete those communities and then designing ministry strategies to respond to those needs. I am also grateful for recent urban anthropology texts, such as Conn and Ortiz[xi] and Kraft,[xii] both of which highlight ethnography as a viable tool in our ministry arsenal.

This is true not only for our urban and intercultural majors, but for all of our graduate students, including Spiritual Formation, Biblical Studies, and MDiv students. In a research methods class, all the students do at least an initial case study or "mini-ethnography" of an individual who is not

a Christian and from a different cultural background than their own. They are given basic categories or criteria with which to collect and organize their data, including life history, family/relationships, friendships/networks, interests/activities, and beliefs/values. Then they are to go back to the Scriptures for the biblical viewpoint on that person's situation and must also propose even a preliminary ministry strategy to bridge the gospel into that culture/community.

Last Fall, in a multi-disciplinary class of about 25 students, studies were conducted in over a dozen cultures. These included African (Togo, Ghana), Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Brazilian, Mexican, Pakistani, Turkish, Assyrian, Polish, German, and African-American. These relationships instigated dialogue about Buddhism, Communism, Taoism, Islam, Judaism, Catholicism, and the New Age movement. The lifestyles of those interviewed varied widely from gang members, pimps, and prostitutes to immigrants (legal and illegal), gays and lesbians. A snapshot of the world and all within a few mile radius of our campus!

We partner the students, many of them in groups, with local church or para-church organizations so that their research serves the needs and furthers the purposes of those ministries. The ethnographies are presented to the leadership of these institutions as snapshots of the cultures and individuals within their communities. This also increases the possibility of following up and even deepening the relationships formed during the research.

Many of our urban ministry and intercultural studies students are encouraged to do more extensive, in depth ethnographic research, including searching out an "informant"[xiii] and even "becoming an insider"[xiv] themselves. This has contributed to a much greater street-wise and culturally sensitive perspective on missions and has also led to the development of exciting, relevant cross-cultural ministry. One such example is an outreach focused on Russian Jews carried out by Moody undergraduate students. A current group of our graduate students are actually researching the spiritual receptivity of Pakistani Muslim taxi drivers!

Of great interest and personal encouragement to me is observing many of our MDiv students embrace the significance of ethnography. Most are hesitant initially and many are from mono-cultural backgrounds, but once they are in the midst of a cross-cultural encounter/interview they see its value with "kingdom eyes" and are much more committed to a missional focus in their current and/or future church endeavors.

But most satisfying of all, and precious in the sight of God, is watching Him cultivate a heart of compassion[xv] in all of our lives as I walk with my students in these diverse, multi-ethnic experiences. Whether in the local reserve mission, county jail, outside of a gay bar, or in an ethnic outreach center, God is breaking our hearts for people in need as we collect their stories and seek to introduce God's story to them in a caring, relevant way.

When it's all said and done, that is exactly what I want to give my life to. The Moody Graduate School has and always will be committed to a biblical hermeneutic. But we are now, with equal passion and persistence, committing to "a hermeneutic of culture," to "combining ethnology with exegesis." [xvi] Somehow, I think that D. L. Moody had the very same thing in mind over 100 years ago. [xvii] May God help us to fulfill our calling in this new multi-ethnic millenium.

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[i] Training Students for Urban Ministry: An Experiential Approach. Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock Publ., 2001.

[ii] The Ethnographic Interview (1979) and Participant Observation (1980), both by Holt, Rinehart, Winston, Inc.

[iii] George Gmelch and Walter P. Zenner's Urban Life: Readings in the Anthropology of the City by Waveland Press, now in its 4th edition (1982, '88, '96, 2002) is a helpful resource, as is Spradley and David W. McCurdy, The Cultural Experience: Ethnography in Complex Society, 2nd edition, also by Waveland, 1989.

[iv] Judith Lingenfelter. "Getting to Know Your New City" In Disciplining the City, 2nd edition, by Roger S. Greenway. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992. See too Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Marvin K Mayers. Ministering Cross Culturally. Baker Books, 1986.

[v] "Christian Ministry in the 21st Century," delivered as the W. H. Griffith Thomas Lectures at Dallas Theological Seminary, February 2-5, 1993.

[vi] 20 September 2002. "Illinois is the most religiously diverse state, with 120 faiths."

[vii] The front page of the 12 August 2002 edition proclaimed, "Chicago has emerged as one of the most diverse communities in the nation - indeed, one of the most diverse in the world."

[viii] Lost in America: How You and Your Church Can Impact the World Next Door. Boulder, CO: Group Books, 2001, p. 16.

[ix] Move Your Church to Action, Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 2000, p. 12.

[x] A Theology as Big as the City. IVP, 1997, p. 13.

[xi] Harvie M. Conn and Manuel Ortiz. Urban Ministry. IVP, 2001.

[xii] Charles H. Kraft. Anthropology for Christian Witness. Orbis Books, 1996.

[xiii] A term used by anthropologists to connote one who guides, instructs, or informs another regarding a particular culture or subculture. The intent is to gain the "emic" (insider) vs. "etic" (outsider) perspective.

[xiv] See my chapter by the same title in a book edited for Moody Press entitled A Heart for the City (1999) for more specifics of our encounters, lessons learned, and ministry opportunities on the streets.

[xv] Ibid.

[xvi] Leith Anderson, as quoted above.

[xvii] Lyle W. Dorsett. A Passion For Souls. Moody Press, 1997, p. 264, 265. "Moody could see... [that] to reach the most people required an urban strategy... immigrants were moving into the major metropolises in ever increasing numbers... between 1860 and Moody's death in 1899... almost 14 million immigrants came to America's shores... the cities needed a huge army of 'home missionaries' - people who were willing to... devote their lives to evangelizing the poorest and most neglected class of urban dwellers."