It is not every day that one comes across a book that combines literary style, theological insight, and an unsentimental encounter with hard realities of the city. In fact, it has been a very long time since I have read anything like *Voices from the City*. This is bracing stuff—and not only for those who are in urban ministry.

(The Rev.) Richard John Neuhaus
President, Religion and Public Life

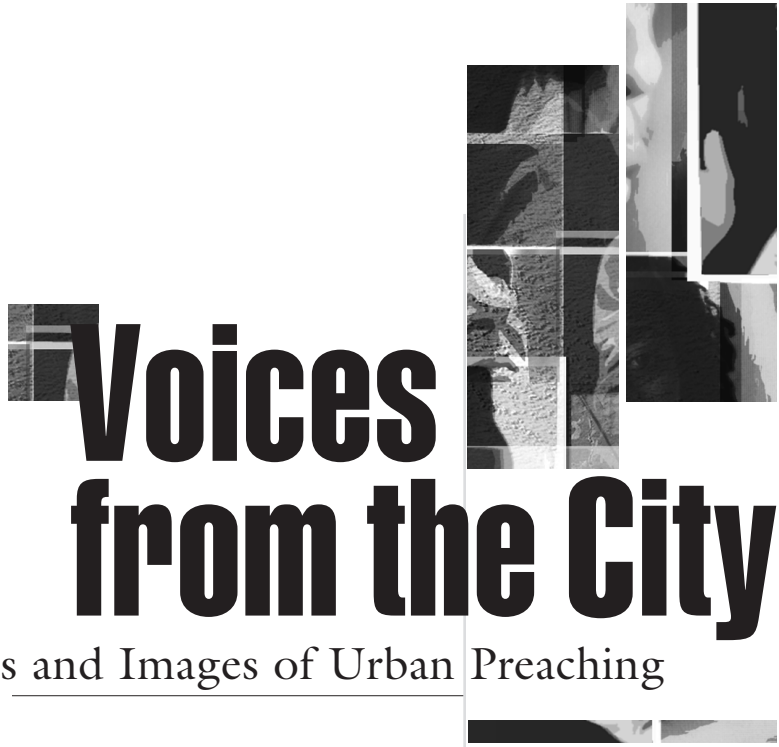
Nunes clearly understands that what the city needs is biblical theology. Urban residents experience the various deaths of the Law daily; this book urges preachers to name it and celebrate the victory of the Gospel over it. Good instruction for all of us who care about the people in the city!

Marva J. Dawn
Teaching Fellow, Spiritual Theology
Regent College, Vancouver, BC
Member, Lutheran Inner-City Ministries
Portland, OR

Even the casual reader will detect Nunes' passion for the city and his understanding of its ills, its racism, its unemployment and inadequate education. But Nunes goes beyond description; he shows how to apply the core values of Lutheranism—Law and Gospel, Word and Sacrament, justification and sanctification—to the urban scene. Pastors and laypersons with roots in other Christian traditions will appreciate the issues and images Nunes identifies and the solution he puts forward: the Christ who has experienced human anguish and suffering who is for us and with us in His Gospel victory!

(The Rev.) William Griffin
Area Representative, Wheat Ridge Ministries

Voices from the City



Voices from the City

Issues and Images of Urban Preaching

John Nunes

CONCORDIA PUBLISHING HOUSE • SAINT LOUIS

Copyright © 1999 Concordia Publishing House

3558 S. Jefferson Avenue, St. Louis, MO 63118-3968

1-800-325-3040 • cph.org

Scripture quotations taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Excerpts from Christ and Culture and Concordia Journal used by permission of Concordia Seminary Publications.

Excerpts from the Book of Concord ed. by Theodore G. Tappert, Copyright © 1983 Fortress Press. Used with permission.

Excerpt from "The Myth of Community Development" by Nicholas Lemann reprinted by permission of International Creative Management, Inc. Copyright © 1994 Nicholas Lemann.

Excerpt from Jesus through the Centuries by Jaroslav Pelikan reprinted by permission of Yale University Press. Copyright ©1985 Yale University.

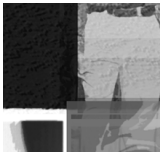
Excerpt from Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars by Henry Louis Gates Jr. reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press. Copyright ©1992 Henry Louis Gates Jr.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of Concordia Publishing House.

Manufactured in the United States of America

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 *16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07*

To Monique and my family



Contents

Foreword 9

Introduction 11

1. What Is Urban? 15

2. Making All Things New 25

3. Dangerous Disconnections 45

4. Clashing of Kingdoms 57

5. Tumbling Walls 65

6. Just Words 79

7. Countering Counterfeit Liberation 87

8. Saying It in the City 103

9. Three Voices from the City: Sample Sermons 109

Notes 129

Bibliography 135

Foreword

During the 1960s and 1970s, much mainline and evangelical denominational literature on urban ministry was skewed in two seemingly contradictory yet mutually distorting ways. First, there were books that used the term "urban ministry" as a euphemism for ministry among poor blacks and Latinos, thereby minimizing the metropolitan character of ministry in the city and its environs. Second, there were texts that glorified and emphasized the contributions of those who had "come back" to the city as missionaries, thereby rendering silent the voices of those who had remained faithful during the time of urban flight.

John Nunes' text offers correctives to both viewpoints. He sees the systemic context of ministry in the city, focusing his attention on churches and institutions in a variety of venues within the metropolitan areas of our country. He hears the voices of those who have remained faithful in those places, enduring the changes, abandonment, promises, joys, and frustrations of all that is life in the metropolis.

Nunes shows us ministry that is responsive to the simple call to follow Christ among the poor. He reveals the reality of the complexity of the systems and institutions in which we are called to be faithful. By focusing on the preached word and enabling us to hear the voices of God's preachers, Nunes resists the reductionist tendencies of many urban ministry texts and offers a rich landscape of metropolitan possibilities for the church of Christ.

Rev. Harold Dean Trulear, Ph.D.
Vice President, Director of Church Collaboration Initiatives
Public/Private Ventures

Introduction

Issues and images. The issues are complex. The debate is often heated. The points of contention are as concrete as life and death. Likewise, the images are hard-core. Crime, poverty, diversity, and opportunity whiz by at a breakneck tempo.

Christian ministry in the city presents unique issues and images. Amid this flux, the message of the Gospel is constant. It is a message in continuity with the prophets of old, except these voices are crying out in an urban wilderness.

Urban preachers are prayerful prophets and poets who speak God's saving story in Jesus Christ within the primary liturgical context of Word and Sacrament. That sacred arena for speaking includes all the places where people work, sleep, play, and pray. Here, the Word spoken and heard becomes enfleshed in life.

The genre of this book bears similarity to the nonfiction memoirist-reportage style, what Joyce Carol Oates refers to as a "hybrid" of research, interviews, analysis, and personal perspective.[1]

The intent of this book is to document the living, ongoing drama of communicating the Gospel on the street-level stage of the city. The players are God's own: preachers who strive to maintain a Lutheran identity on the raw edges—indeed, the bleeding edges—of American urban life. Similarly, those who hear that sacred story are God's own people; redeemed sinners/saints are the object of this drama. God is always the Subject, the Actor, the Principal, and the Agent of salvation. The story of his promise intersects the human story from beginning to end, a story full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

A primary feature of the following pages is interviews with ministers on the front lines. These pastors possess a contagious pas-

sion for the Word and an excitement for proclaiming it to people. The singularity of their commitment is exemplary. The scope of their sincerity shines through even amid the gargantuan challenges they face. It comes through in a commitment to maintain integrity to Christ's call to ministry despite adversity. It comes through in a compassion for people in pain. It comes through in a devotion to proclaim the promises of God made known in the benefits of Christ "even when steeples are falling." It comes, in some cases, even as neglect and a persistent lack of resources ravage their cavernous church buildings. But these ministers preach on.

They preach because at the core of their conviction is victory in Jesus. These pastors are Gospel preachers. With words and images, they draw straight lines of connection between the Good News of universal victory and the pervasive and perverse experiences of urban defeat. The voices represented in this volume have been chosen deliberately because of their depth of reflection on urban ministry questions. Quite incidentally they also represent a range of people groups found in the city. They serve black, white, Hispanic, and Asian families and communities. These communities are places of diverse social and ethnic strata.

The interviews for this book were conducted March 11–13, 1996. At that time, the interviewees were serving in the following places of ministry:

The Rev. Donald E. Anthony, pastor,
Berea Lutheran Church (LCMS),
Baltimore, Maryland

The Rev. Victor J. Belton, pastor,
Peace Lutheran Church (LCMS),
Decatur (Atlanta), Georgia

The Rev. Dr. James Capers, pastor,
St. Paul Lutheran Church (ELCA),
Decatur (Atlanta), Georgia

The Rev. John R. Cochran, pastor,
Trinity Lutheran Church (ELCA),
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

The Rev. Joseph Donnella, Lutheran chaplain (ELCA),
Howard University,
Washington, D.C.

The Rev. Carlos Hernandez, pastor,
Trinity Lutheran Church (LCMS),
Glen Cove (Long Island), New York

The Rev. Steven Marsh, pastor,
St. Luke's Lutheran Church (ELCA),
Brooklyn, New York

The Rev. Ulmer Marshall, pastor,
Trinity Lutheran Church (LCMS),
Mobile, Alabama

The Rev. Dr. Frazier N. Odom, pastor, Transfiguration
Lutheran Church (LCMS),
Saint Louis, Missouri

The Rev. Doyle J. Theimer, pastor,
Saint John the Evangelist (LCMS),
Brooklyn, New York

The Rev. James Wetzstein, pastor,
Our Savior Lutheran Church (LCMS),
Gary, Indiana

1

What Is Urban?

The voices are many. From trained experts to amateur demographers, opinions abound on what defines "urban." For some, "urban" is merely a euphemism: a kinder and gentler way to say Asian, black, Hispanic, or any other concentration of non-middle-class Anglo people. From this perspective, "urban" is any ghetto inhabited by socioethnic groups other than the majority population. Others look at the term "urban" more expansively. They use it to describe the geographical links among suburbs, inner-ring suburbs, inner-city, and ex-urban communities.

Urban *ministry* is most often understood as a set of complex cultural and demographic conditions that require specialized spiritual gifts. An urban ministry setting is more like a non-Western mission setting than a traditional parish-based ministry. It is, however, important to distinguish between doing urban ministry and doing ministry in an urban setting. Urban ministry requires a high degree

of sensitivity to the context. It requires a theologizing that correlates to the community.

> *Brooklyn, New York, is unquestionably urban. There are a lot of immigrants. New York is one of the most political places I have ever been. [It has] a lot of activism for that reason and a lot of sensitivity to racial issues.—Doyle J. Theimer*

Even some comfortably suburban communities—once looked on as "distant" suburbs—are taking on the flavor of urban life, as well as the benefits and the costs. Few communities could better typify the suburbs and the flight from the central cities than post-war Long Island. Levittown was basically Suburbia, U.S.A., yet many or most portions of Long Island are now urban.

> *Long Island, New York, … has more features of an urban community than it does of a suburban. It has HUD housing. Some of it is almost like being in Queens.—Carlos Hernandez*

So-called "inner-ring" suburbs can be extremely urban. These suburbs are the geopolitical units closest to the city, like Prince George's County, Maryland (Washington, D.C.); Melrose Park, Illinois (Chicago); or Southfield, Michigan (Detroit). Often, these suburbs date back to the early 20th century and represent some of the oldest growth rings beyond the city limits. Sometimes they suffer from the same crumbling infrastructures afflicting the core city.

Is any place immune to urban problems? Some argue that access to electronic communication and the ready availability of five hundred cable channels has created a global *city*, in contrast to a global *village*. Supporters of this view contend that even remote crossroads in our postmodern world now have urban features. This drives home the imperative of studying the cities and of developing

a theology that is appropriate for the city. Preaching, as the place where the theological rubber of the pulpits hits the pew of human experience, is a good place to begin.

Place of Paradox

The paradoxical notions of Lutheran theology, I think are most revealing and helpful for an urban context. We often talk about threat and promise—about Law and Gospel—in classical Lutheran language. But we could also extend that paradoxical language in other ways. We can help urban people to understand that not only do threat and promise characterize our relationship with God, but threat and promise characterize life in our cities. The promise, of course, is God's transforming grace and love among people.—Joseph Donnella

Paradoxes are built into the reality of life. Arguably, these paradoxes are more pronounced and more profoundly encountered in urban areas. The marginal edges of life can be sharper in the city. The sinner in us is easy to nourish with the ample availability of temptation. The saint, by contrast, can approach the heroic because of ample opportunities for expressing faith through service to God and neighbor. An example of this paradox is conveyed in the fact that blacks living in the United States are often the most religiously conservative and evangelically traditional people on the planet. In fact, inner cities have many more pew spaces per capita than suburban communities. On the other hand, the paradox persists: genuine piety alongside indulgent pathology.

Law and Gospel are very important. Young people, young people, and young people surround us all the time. It isn't just talking about forgiveness, but there

are many applications of the Law, which Luther didn't think about. It is the measured balance, balance, balance of the Law and the Gospel for living; the Law and the Gospel, spoken over and over, in every situation, is very, very, very important.—John R. Cochran

In the final analysis, what urban believers share in common—their struggles and their celebrations—supersedes their social and ethnic differences. Each believer experiences the challenge of keeping faith in that uniquely modern geopolitical unit, the large city. In each of these voices from the city, there is a pastoral passion for getting the Gospel into the hearts and lives of God's people. Finally, and not to be overlooked, we hear in each voice a commitment to theologize in a manner consistent with Lutheran identity. That truth is nonnegotiable. (God's truth is revealed in the Old and New Testaments, a truth that has been entrusted to the Confessional writings of the Lutheran church. These writings clearly flow from the Bible, the "pure and clear fountain" of God's Word.) What does vary, and greatly at times, is the context in which that one truth is spoken.

We did a vacation Bible school and I renamed [it] "Our VBS," [which stood for] "Values, Beauty, and Strength" … Our Lutheran doctrine and the Bible in particular teach that we are valuable people. If that was not the case, Christ would not have come and died for us no matter our situation of life. We are beautiful people because we are created in the image of God. We are strong people because we have the strength of God. The strength of Christ who overcame death and everything else is at our disposal. In our church, we teach [that all of this is] a gift … a free gift that you don't have to work for … It's God's gift, and I think that is a tremendous message for people who feel like they cannot do any better; who feel like

they are trapped; people who don't have a good image of themselves because of their surroundings, because of what they see every day, because of what they hear every day. I believe the Gospel really frees us up to say that no matter what we think about ourselves at the moment, Christ thinks a whole lot of us. He enables us to think better of ourselves because of what he has done. That's a gift that we just simply receive. It has a tremendous freeing power. That's the Gospel; it's what we teach in the Lutheran church.—Donald E. Anthony

While serving in Detroit, I received an urgent phone call from a pastor in a difficult ministry situation. He needed advice on a question usually associated with urban settings. But he was not calling from L.A. or D.C. His home was the Midwest, but not the major metropolitan centers of St. Louis or Kansas City. The request came from a pastor in Missouri serving in a city that does not even rank among the top 20 metropolitan areas in the state. He wanted my help as he counseled a family in crisis. The teenage son, recently confirmed in the faith of Christ, was running for his life—literally. He was caught up in gang crossfire between rival Bloods and Cripts. The pastor wanted fast, reliable information for his ministry and community: How should I intervene? What do I say to the family? to my congregation? He was dealing with big city problems in small-town Middle America!

Both an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (Dr. James Capers) and a Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (Rev. Victor Belton) congregation in suburban Atlanta are represented in these interviews. The setting for both congregations (Decatur, Georgia) unquestionably qualifies them as "urban." In these churches, three distinct characteristics emerge that serve to define the ministry setting as urban: poverty, violent crime, and diversity.

The variety that exists demographically in the met-

ropolitan [Atlanta] area is the variety that exists here at Peace Lutheran Church. At any one time, we are speaking to Boomers and Busters and Generation Xers and war generation folks. They all have a preference for how they would like to hear the Lord presented.—Victor J. Belton

Inescapable Realities

What ails cities is not hard to detect. The symptoms are easily discernable. Too much of what we see and hear of urban life is defeat:

- Streets strewn with broken glass.
- Streets lined with a surplus of liquor stores.
- Streets dotted with stores suffering from a famine of necessities such as fresh milk and bread without mold.
- Streets as backdrops for defeated existences eked out in crumbling buildings tagged with the script of gang machismo, hieroglyphics of hate that boastfully promise death to rivals.
- Streets populated by preadolescent boys, who are too young to be so radically alienated from human values, yet are lifelessly living defeated existences.

To all appearances, it is defeat when children unconscionably commit murder for something as insignificant as an article of clothing or something as intangible as honor. It is defeat when young boys, not yet men, die prematurely, holding guns too big for their not fully formed hands. It is defeat when pubescent girls, living prematurely in grown women's bodies, give birth to inheritors of multigenerational poverty and dependency. It is defeat when those who rightly draw our greatest sympathy, defeated senior citizens, cower in fear, prisoners in their own homes. To all appearances,