

# Looking for the “Social Glue”: A Response to Michael Rynkiewich

by *Alan McMahan*

**T**hank you very much, Michael. I really appreciated your paper, and how in just a few pages you were able to bring out so many pertinent concepts that demand our attention. I actually can't think of a topic that might be more relevant, more significant, or a greater challenge for doing missions today. You have used this case study very effectively to personalize some of the dynamics that are in play among peoples stretched across the globe. It's a very thoughtful treatment on what it means to be a people and how identity and boundaries are rapidly fluctuating and evolving in ways that challenge some of our traditional assumptions.

## *Evolving Anthropology*

I appreciated this study because it was done by an anthropologist. The discipline of anthropology sort of grew up in the village. It has typically used qualitative research methods to go deep with a few people over time, so the traditional ethnography took a year or more of data collection in order for the researcher to understand the worldview of the people they were working with. That slow approach now seems like a luxury. The world is changing so rapidly now with an evolving landscape fueled by urbanization, migration and globalization. We are seeing some challenges emerge that we haven't anticipated.

If you think back, our missiological strategies over the last several decades were based on a couple of key insights from certain eminent contributors. One was Donald McGavran, who talked about the homogeneous unit principle and how we needed to see the gospel manifested in every people group—every cultural group. And so we trained missionaries to go deep into the local languages of these unreached people groups and help plant a church that would be indigenous in that context. Then Ralph Winter comes along and refines this idea of the people group concept, and builds on it so that we began to identify and quantify all these remaining people groups that need

*Editor's Note:* This is a slightly edited version of the author's response to Michael Rynkiewich's paper entitled *Mission in "the Present Time": What about the People in Diaspora?* (see pp. 103-14), which was presented to members of the International Society for Frontier Missiology on September 13, 2013 (Plano, TX).

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to be reached. But, of course, your study, Michael, begins to ask the question of what these principles look like in a more modern landscape.

### *My Personal Context*

First a little background on myself. I was a missionary in Indonesia and then spent a number of years in New York as well, working out of midtown Manhattan at the King’s College. Our campus building was the Empire State Building, so we used to say it was the tallest campus building in the world. But since being at Biola, I’ve taken students back to New York and into Los Angeles to do urban research. We’re looking specifically at immigrant people groups, where they’re locating, how they’re evolving, and how they’re influencing the American context. And it’s been fascinating, especially when I reflect back on my missionary experience in Indonesia. I was with the Christian and Missionary Alliance and they had been immensely successful in Indonesia. They had planted over 2000 churches mainly in the interior areas of Kalimantan, Sulawesi and Papua (although, they were not very successful in urban, Muslim Java). But that was a result of those decades of missionary preparation that prepared us to go into monocultural people groups to learn and understand their local ways.

### *Indonesia Morphing*

So it was a bit of a shock to me a little over a year ago when a student knocks at my door at Biola and says, “We would like for you to speak at a church growth conference.”

“That’s great.” I said. “Where is it?”

“It’s in Surabaya, Indonesia,” he replied.

I thought, Wow, it’s not in Anaheim!

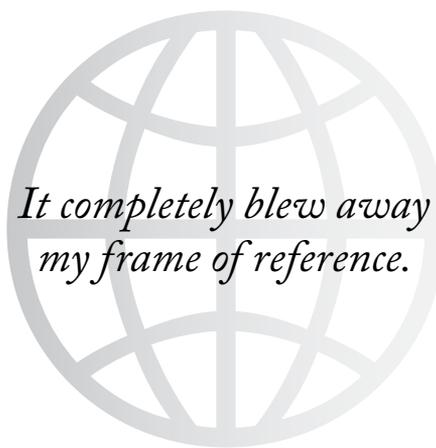
So I asked the first question you always ask: “Will you cover my airfare?”

And he said, “Oh yeah, sure; we’ll fly your wife, too.”

Sometime later in the conversation (after verifying that I could make those dates) I said, “So about how many people will be at this conference?”

“I don’t know, it’s hard to say. Maybe 25,000,” he replied. My mouth fell open. 25,000? I’m thinking, What kind of place is this?

Well, I ended up going to Surabaya and speaking at Bethany Church, which is running currently about 170,000 people, right in the middle of the world’s largest Muslim country. It just completely blew away my frame of reference. When I was there in earlier years, the church was fearful and hiding. Evangelism was illegal—it still



is—but it was a church that was in no way dominant on the landscape of that city. They were just trying to survive—and that’s still very much the case with many churches in Indonesia.

This experience really piqued my interest so when I had the opportunity to do a sabbatical study this last spring, I decided to go and explore the rapidly growing urban church movements in seven different global gateway cities in four countries spread across Asia. And I have to tell you the insights were very interesting. What we’re actually seeing occur is leading to a redefinition of mission: social and personal identity means something different in this kind of changing landscape.

### *Urban Migration*

Michael talks about emigration with an “e” and immigration with an “i” with reference to internal and international migration flows. The United Nations now reports that worldwide, the total number of people immigrating internationally is greater than the size of Brazil. So migration is occurring at a rate unprecedented in world history.

And urbanization, of course, is going right along with all this international migration, so that they are now predicting that 90 percent of the population of the United States and Western Europe will be urban by the year 2050. And 70 percent of the world’s population will be urban by that same time. It was back around 2008 that we crossed the 50 percent mark in terms of how many peoples of the earth were urban. So urban migration is changing the landscape. We’re having to admit that immigration-migration patterns are probably doing more to alleviate global poverty than all the Christian charities combined (in terms of the flow of money going back home). And, of course, across international networks and those domestically within a country, we are not only seeing the flow of money but of ideas. And that was aptly identified in Michael’s paper, how ideas are flowing not only through the Internet but also through a reciprocal migratory pattern that’s taking place. So, in Beijing where I was in the spring, they are now estimating that there are 120,000 house churches that represent the face of evangelical Christianity in that city. That kind of phenomenon is changing the dialogue not only in the city, but in the government. And some see a softening of the government’s opposition to Christianity in China in the years to come.

Michael’s article made me think about the ways cities function. Cities have this powerful magnetism that draws people in. In Indonesia there’s a word called *ketinggalan*. Among the villagers in rural areas it means, “If we’re not careful, we’re going to be left behind.”

It has the idea that the world's moving on. So they move to the city in order to participate in the new opportunities, hoping for better days. Of course, they rarely find it, but often end up in slums on the periphery of the city; it's not quite as advertised.

### *High Density Environments*

The massive power of cities pulls people together, creating a number of interesting factors that relate to the opportunities connected with diasporas. When cities draw people in, they compress them in high-density environments. So when I teach my class in urban research I find it much easier to get this point across in New York than I do in LA, because New York is more vertical. That high compression takes people that are very different from each other and puts them on the same subway train, and the close proximity of highly divergent worldviews generates new re-combinations, and it shifts reality for the urban dweller.

Cities slam people together in high compression environments, which results in "cultural explosions." Imagine something like a super collider that's taking particles and slamming them together at high speed and out of that comes all kinds of particles. Those particles represent new innovations taking place. That's what's happening in our cities with diverse people in high compression environments. They start to question worldview assumptions, and they begin to take on new ways of thinking and adopt new identities in the process.

Cities have a power not only to draw in, but also to send out again. So the city functions to create transmission and distribution networks that span large regions where the footprint of the city stretches out over a lot of other places. It's fascinating how all of this operates to shift the identities of people. And I think that is the crucial point where Michael's article really focused our attention: how are people(s) beginning to think of themselves differently?

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Let me give you an example. In Jakarta a number of massive churches now exist—40,000 people in one, 30,000 in another. And it's interesting that these large churches are drawing in all kinds of people like giant vacuum cleaners. They are not homogeneously-focused churches, but are drawing in a large diversity of people. And among their population are people groups, unreached people groups, which are present by the hundreds or even the thousands. It forces us to think about our normal missionary deployment strategy of sending a missionary to a village area to work with a monocultural unreached people group. That progress has been slow. And often in those rural places that receptivity has been low because they represent very traditional societies reinforced by generations of a prescribe way of thinking. But in the city this begins to break down because identities start to change.

### *The Professional*

Here's another interesting urban profile. In Jakarta we are finding Muslim girls who live in a *kampung*, a traditional Muslim "neighborhood," but who also have a job in the business district downtown. When they leave home in the morning, they're wearing the head coverings and the traditional Muslim garb. But on the bus they take that off, stick it in their purse, and simply wear their business suit (which they had on underneath), so as to look more mainstream in that the urban context. In the business world, in their professional lives, they have a different kind of identity, or the opportunity to forge one.

So what we are finding is that the churches that are really growing most rapidly in Jakarta are churches that speak to that professional identity.

In these large churches especially, you'll find that often over half of the church staff are tech people. I found one church that had something like sixty-nine paid staff, half of them tech people (lighting tech, media tech, sound tech, social network tech, etc.). The worship services are very contemporary, and often done in English, or the Indonesian language, both of which function as trade languages that cut across ethnic divides and mother tongues to unite these people together. These churches deliver a very high-powered, media-driven "light and sound" show that you might find in many contemporary churches here in the United States.

As I try to work this through my missionary brain, I ask myself how this work compares to our traditional mission strategy of reaching these people. And I've realized that they're communicating on a new wavelength, or at least a different wavelength. These folk from unreached people groups will attend out of curiosity, hear the message, then go back out to the traditional neighborhoods, where they begin to share their faith in their *aikos* networks. Kinship and neighborhood networks are most powerful in uniting people together in the village, but in the urban contexts it is more often the professional network, or affinity groups based on hobbies (or special interests or faith) that pull people together from diverse groups. These re-combinations are generating a lot of opportunity.

### *A New Social Glue*

Let me just say a couple of things that I think you're pointing to in your article, Michael, things that we ought to think about. First, I think we've got to rethink exactly what the frequency is that we are broadcasting on. And we've got to determine what the "social glue"

is that is holding people together. It’s not necessarily ethnicity or language anymore, since we’re often operating in these trade languages. There’s a new glue holding people together. I’d like to suggest we need to be “glue sniffers.” We need to train our personnel to sniff the glue that’s holding people together. Now that doesn’t look like what we are used to doing and thinking about.

Secondly, the other interesting development is this idea of the multiethnic church. Gary McIntosh and I wrote a book that came out in 2012 entitled *Being the Church in a Multiethnic Community: Why It Matters and How It Works*. In it we looked at some of the new opportunities for ministry that are emerging from those churches. The multiethnic church cuts across these ethnic divides, and plays to this different glue that’s holding people together. It might be based on the amount of

education a person has (or the socioeconomic level that they’ve got) more than on ethnicity.

What happens in these multiethnic churches is that they’re able to create a certain ambiguity, where it’s not one culture or the other, but it’s all of our cultures together. If I don’t quite fit the monocultural church nearby, I can probably find a place in this new world and the big multiethnic church. As missionaries then we can look for existing multiethnic churches in the city (or create them if none are found) and then leverage that opportunity to equip new believers to take the good news back into the mother tongue peoples through the networks that these people already have. So they are able to do E1 or E2 evangelism instead of being held back by the E3 distance of traditional missionaries. We need to use the critical mass developed in the multiethnic church to reach the

unreached people groups that are present and distributed throughout these urban environments.

So this was a great paper, Michael. I appreciate that you’ve done it and the way you’ve provoked our thinking. **IJFM**

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