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The city is too complex for isolated church leadership

A plea for connectedness and collaboration in city networks

Complex church landscapes have long been a subject of research, especially in the context of the city. The many live and virtual connections within the city, together with a multitude of churches and initiatives, have led to a network of collaborating churches and organizations in many cities. Piet Brinksma explores the challenges that city networks pose for leadership in churches and other organizations. He approaches this from a missional vision of being church together in the city. His research and analysis show that while leadership that extends beyond one's own organization is indeed a major challenge, it also offers many opportunities and benefits. This article is full of practical tips on these network-based, connecting forms of leadership.

… Should I not have compassion for Nineveh, that great city, where more than 120,000 people live who do not even know the difference between left and right, and all those animals as well?

– Jonah 4:11

When I look at the congregation in Amsterdam-Noord, which I have had the privilege of serving as pastor for many years, I see a remarkably diverse group of people before me. It reflects the neighborhoods in Amsterdam-Noord and IJburg that we focus on. In our modest community, you'll find people of all ages and a great deal of cultural and social diversity. There are seekers, people who are new to the Christian faith or have been Christians for a long time. Their religious backgrounds are just as diverse: Muslim, Hindu, New Age, Reformed, Evangelical, Charismatic, etc., but often also completely secular.How can you convey a message and lead a community in a way that aligns with the context and worldviews of all these members? How can you help these people

grow in their discipleship? How can you be pastorally relevant to the diverse issues at play in their lives? How can you stand together as a community in the mission of the Kingdom of God in our neighborhoods, with their range of challenges and opportunities? That is a major challenge for church leaders in the city**.**

Do leaders in non-urban areas not face these challenges? Certainly, but outside the cities, life and the issues at play are often more manageable, and the culture is often less intense. The city amplifies culture, diversity, and dynamism—both positively and negatively.

Reflecting on leadership in the context of the city, my conclusion is that no single church leader can handle this complexity—***at least, not alone***. In this article, I want to offer a baseline for thinking in two directions to gain a better perspective on the leadership of churches and ministries in a complex city: 1) Build spiritual leadership with diverse gifts within your own church or ministry; 2) develop greater connection and partnership with other leaders of churches and Christian organisations in the city (experiencing the blessing of being part of a broader movement of God's Church in the city). In various cities, forms of city movements are emerging that stimulate and facilitate connection, unity, and collaboration.

In a geographically connected group of churches and organizations in Amsterdam-Noord—which is part of the larger city movement —I have been able to experience this firsthand. After many years of meetings, conversations, and sharing meals with colleagues, a great deal of mutual trust has grown. Years ago, we also decided to look at our district together and discuss our mission. This has resulted in a embedded and natural flow of collaboration, in which the strengths and potential of one congregation can help compensate for the weaknesses of another. We make use of each other's facilities, teach in the other congregation's training programs, work on missionary projects, and discuss the challenges we face. This brings satisfaction, hope, and inspiration.

This article is therefore a call to develop city movements, to strengthen a healthy and fruitful climate for leadership in the city. Of course, this is not limited to the city. The same principles and possibilities also apply to villages and regions outside the cities.

What are city movements?

A movement of UNITY: the entire Church in the city

Around the world, we see churches in many cities coming together to launch movements focused on the city (in the "100 Cities Summit" in Washington, D.C., in 2018, there were far more then 100 cities with city movements represented). In the Netherlands, for example, there are more than 30 cities developing some form of city wide movement. An important aspect of these city movements is the pursuit of unity and connection among the various denominations within the church. The Body of Christ in the city is diverse, yet is one in Him: "…that they may be one as we are one — I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me…" (John 17:22–23).

A motto often used for these movements is: ***The whole Church, with the whole gospel, for the whole city*** (derived from the motto of the Lausanne Movement).

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It is difficult to trace the exact origins of the growth of city movements, but one of the seeds is the ecumenical movement from the early 20th century, which became visible after the founding of the World Council of Churches in 1948. In many cities, there is a branch of the National Council of Churches (RvK in Dutch) in which local churches and denominations engage in dialogue, seek out joint activities (dialogues or diaconal activities), and provide representation to the media and government. Toward the end of the last century, a new ecumenical initiative emerged: the Global Christian Forum, with its Dutch version, the Dutch National Christian Forum (NCF). Unlike the RvK, the NCF strives for a balanced representation of traditional denominations—and new churches, particularly evangelical and Pentecostal. At NCF meetings, leaders can contribute more in a personal capacity, and faith-based conversations always serve as the starting point for discussions. Organizations such as the Evangelical Alliance (EA) and the Lausanne Movement also promote cooperation and unity within the church. Both have networks that focus on unifying movements in the city. In recent decades, organizations such as Movementday (Pier et al., 2016) and City-to-City (initiated by Tim Keller (2012)) have contributed significantly to inspiring and developing urban networks for the Kingdom of God in the city. In the Netherlands, the City Movements Nederland platform (*citymovements.nl*) serves as an important catalyst for this.

Today's city movements go beyond discussions about cooperation or unity. They seek to mobilize and unite the entire Church (all churches in the city in all their diversity, all believers who follow Christ, and leaders of all ministries, organizations, and businesses driven by the Kingdom of God).

A Movement of MISSION: The Whole Gospel

Another component relevant to the development of city movements is the shift toward in the understanding of the essence of "mission." In his research on mission in the recent history of various denominations of the Church, Ross Langmead (2004) found that this shift is evident across the breadth of the Church.

The focus of mission has shifted from seeking to expand one's own church or denomination to a mission centered on the growth of the Kingdom of God: "The Kingdom must be central to mission, not the church" (p. 242). As a result, mission is not merely aimed at increasing the number of believers or members, but takes a holistic approach: the embodiment of the Kingdom of God in all facets of life. It is the ***Missio Dei*****.** This means that "the church is not the sender, but the one sent; mission is no longer merely the work of the church, but rather it is the church functioning in its calling" (p. 167). According to theologians such as Christopher Wright (2006), this understanding forms a key theme throughout the Bible. When studying this story of God's mission, it becomes increasingly clear that this mission is focused both on redemption (or salvation) and on promoting restoration, peace, and righteousness in society.

In city movements, therefore, working toward unity is not an end in itself. They always have a strong missionary focus. It is a unity

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that is focused on shared involvement in God's mission. He was already at work in the city before us and continues to be so when we hand it back over to Him. *The whole gospel*—is the conviction that the power of the gospel can redeem people and reconcile them with God (the answer to emptiness and alienation), bring healing (relief from and comfort regarding the pain they feel), and bring restoration (the change necessary for greater justice and wholeness) (Barentsen & Blok, 2024, pp. 66–68, 326–29).

A movement focused on the CONTEXT: for the entire city

The incarnational view of mission cannot be separated from place. Jesus came into this world and was the true "Immanuel": God with us and among us. His incarnation was not abstract, but became very concrete in Bethlehem and in Nazareth, where He participated in society. During the years of His ministry, He traveled from city to city to proclaim the nearness of God's Kingdom in the reality of these places. In today's culture, according to Bartholomew, we live "in the midst of a crisis of the concept of place. In our late-modern era, we have lost that very human sense of place amid the compression of time and space that characterizes postmodernity and globalization."

"Place has become something we move through—preferably at high speed—and virtual reality is no substitute for it" (Bartholomew, 2011).

For city movements, this focus is the city, because it matters where God has placed us. Cities receive promises, warnings, and judgments, and are a major theme in God's words and actions. The theology of the city is a key lens through which to understand God's mission. Ray Bakke (1997) has made a significant contribution to this field. Many others are following in his footsteps.

In a biblical study by theologian and urban architect Pieter Bos (2016), he concludes that the city, as a collective, bears shared responsibility in God's plan for fostering a place, a climate, and conditions that enable people from different cultures to lead peaceful and flourishing lives. A notable example of this is Jeremiah's words to the exiles in Babylon: "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit; marry and have children … Pray to the LORD for the city where I have exiled you, and work for its prosperity (shalom), for when the city prospers, you too will prosper" (Jer. 29:4–7). We as the Church are part of this collective responsibility: "A city prospers through the blessing of the upright, but the words of the wicked bring it to ruin" (Prov. 11:11).

What does that look like in Amsterdam?

To give an example, I'll briefly outline the development of the city movement in Amsterdam. More than 30 years ago, in addition to the RvK in Amsterdam, there was a felt need for pastors to meet. Under the leadership of Floyd McClung (Youth With a Mission), an Evangelical Association was started that held periodic meetings with pastors and leaders. Efforts were also made toward city-wide prayer. Both initiatives planted seeds, but did not endure. At the beginning of this century,

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A number of developments were important for the growth of a citywide movement. Youth With a Mission launched a prayer movement in which intercessors from many churches were trained to pray respectfully and effectively for the city. This resulted in a 24/7 prayer network made up of intercessors from more than 80 churches (Kingdom
Prayernet). Meanwhile, a movement of church planting and renewal had also gained momentum (Amsterdam in Motion for Jesus Christ), with training and inspiration from City-to-City in the U.S., which resulted in City-to-City Amsterdam with 30 churches. In Amsterdam-Zuidoost, Pentecostal immigrant churches (approx. 40) joined together to form a network: the Pentecostal Council of Churches (PCC). This network initially focused primarily on issues facing immigrants but has increasingly shifted its focus to integral mission work in Amsterdam-Zuidoost. The Protestant Church of Amsterdam also launched new initiatives and established mission outposts in Amsterdam.

In addition, a sense of urgency arose among a number of pastors involved in the city prayer initiative to seek a form of unifying leadership that would bring together the entire Church of Amsterdam and help mobilize it for the mission of the Kingdom. This led to the launch of the Amster-
dam Council of Christian Leaders (ACCL), a network of networks for the city. Recently, the migrant network SKIN joined this initiative. This broad-based ACCL coordinates a shared vision, citywide connection, exchange, collaboration, and research. Every year, the ACCL brings all pastors together for a fellowship dinner where leaders from all denominations and cultures meet. Also

The ACCL coordinates conferences, summits, and citywide events (such as the recent "Celebrating Jesus in Amsterdam" event). Roundtable meetings are held with ministries focused on working with refugees, sex workers, diaconal work, evangelism, prayer, etc. The city movement also encourages connection within city districts so that pastors and leaders can serve their neighborhoods together in God's mission, complementing and supporting one another. Particularly in Amsterdam-Noord and Amsterdam-Zuidoost, there is increasing connection and collaboration among churches with a missional focus.

Leadership Challenges for Church Leaders in the City

The right scorecard?

To lead, you need to know where to guide your people, church, or organization. What outcomes do we expect? One of the biggest obstacles for church leaders is that their mission or goals aren't always clear. Often, they're left unstated or may not be the right ones. What is expected of pastors by their church board, denomination or bishop? Generally, the focus is on effectively carrying out the tasks that need to be done
must include: preaching, organizing church activities, caring for the members, and maintaining sound finances. It would also be wonderful if the church were to grow.
The paradox is that while these things are necessary in and of themselves, they are not an end in themselves. They comprise only a part of what we find in the Bible regarding the outcomes of the Church's calling. The previous sections discussed the mission of the entire Church in the city. This holistic mission

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is not just about building our own church, but about increasing the number of Jesus' followers and bringing about a greater manifestation of God's Kingdom in our community. The challenge is to look beyond our own organization. Churches should understand their specific contribution within the bigger picture of the Church in the city. Everything we do in our churches and organizations should contribute to this, and all members of the Church have the privilege of being partners in God's mission.

If this is what church leaders are called to do, then there is still much work to be done. It is especially important that leaders themselves gain insight into this and develop a passion for it. Second, it is necessary that their boards, church councils, elders, etc. also embrace this. Otherwise, a conflict will arise between vision and expectations. God's mission is not just a department within the church; it is the church's fundamental reason for existence and its mandate. That is why the church's "scorecard" lies in our context—the city. A city movement would be the ideal setting to help one another in discovering this, applying it to, and translating it for our own local churches or ministries.

Elaborating on the Church's Calling within the Big Picture of the City

It is important to translate the broad and abstract vision of the calling of the Body of Christ into a few concrete elements that are significant for the Church as a whole and to which every church and ministry can contribute. Based on my research experience, I identify—in addition to working toward unity—six distinct elements that help fulfill our calling in God's mission in the city. (Becoming God's ecclesia in Amsterdam (Brinksma, 2018)):

- *Developing a contextualized theology of the Kingdom.* Connect learning to research, listening to, and loving the city with a deep understanding of the theology of the Kingdom. Then, work toward insights into how the Good News of the Kingdom can touch the actual experiences, realities, and worldviews of people in the city.

- *Praying for the city (serving as priests for the community).* To be a community that feels connected to the city and offers intercession with compassion and insight. Praying for God's grace, transformation, restoration, and justice in the city. Coupled with intercession for a vital and healthy Church that allows itself to be used by God in His mission for the city.

- *Making disciples of people from all (sub)cultures in the city and plant relevant churches.* To equip people in the church to share their testimony and evangelize, and to work together to find ways to help seekers become followers of Jesus. Together in the city to plant relevant communities that fit into their neighborhoods and districts.

- *Equipping all believers to function as leaders and ambassadors of God's Kingdom in all spheres of society*—people who bring God's justice and peace into their houses, workplaces, or other spheres of influence. Christians with leadership skills who work outside of church activities are also regarded as spiritual leaders of the Kingdom. They are used by God to contribute to the sustainable flourishing of the city. As those sent out with

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a calling to operate in the "marketplace" from the perspective of the Kingdom of God (Grigg, 2009).

- *Being a community of faith with the neighborhood: a model and representation of Shalom in the environment where we are placed.* In our individualistic, postmodern cities, we live side by side but apart. To give the neighborhood the opportunity to experience God's peace and love, it is important that not only individuals but also communities of believers are visibly and actively present and engaged in the neighborhood. This is incarnational mission (Wells, 2017).

- *Serving through relevant ministries that bring more shalom to situations marked by pain and brokenness.* Through inspiration, love, and hope—by the Spirit of Christ—every church and ministry can discover the contribution that aligns with its calling and capabilities. In what ways can they utilize people, resources, and gifts to help comfort, show compassion, or heal pain, and to contribute to the restoration of brokenness? Together as the Church in the city, there is a wide range of ministries that contribute to the city's blessing.

Not only that: leading the church or organization together

To lead a church or ministry in the healthy development of the six elements mentioned above, various
leadership influences. Paul writes: "And it is he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Eph. 4:11–12). I am not arguing that every church must appoint a person for each of the ministries mentioned, but it is necessary that there is a balance within the leadership between apostolic (expanding, building, and safeguarding the DNA), prophetic (hearing what God says, God's direction and guidance), teaching (edification through the Word of God), missional (engaging in God's mission), and pastoral (soul care, restoration, and growth) contributions. In addition, other leadership gifts are needed (administrators, organizers, etc.). Multiple leaders with diverse gifts are needed to build together toward the church. All too often, this is expected of a pastor or leader alone. This is not feasible in the complex context of the city; therefore, *don't try to do it alone*. Build teams that are diverse in their gifts (Westerhof, 2025).

In the city, in addition to dealing with a diversity of gifts, there is also a need for leadership that can navigate different cultures and backgrounds. This is not always easy, but everyone can grow in this area. Cabrera & Unruh (2012, p. 43) conclude that conscious openness, curiosity, and spending time with people from other cultures result in greater cross-cultural skills to draw upon. The church in Antioch is a biblical example of this, for the leaders mentioned in Acts 13:1 represent a variety of gifts (prophets, teachers, apostles) and cultural backgrounds. Cultural diversity also translates into different views on leadership (see especially Plueddemann, 2009).

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Not alone: all members are partners in God's mission

"Don't do it alone" also means that the Church's calling is ultimately fulfilled through the contributions of all members of the Church of Christ. Again, Paul says: "From that head, the body is held together, supported, and held in place by all the ligaments. Each part contributes according to its ability to the growth of the body, which thus builds itself up through love" (Eph. 4:16). Christians are empowered and equipped, based on their identity, to fulfill a role in their homes, at work, within networks, and among family, to embody the Kingdom of God there through their gifts and influence. They are all used to give shape to the Church's calling as God's mission in the city.

Not alone: embedded in an city movement

Even if there is a well-functioning team with a good mix of gifts, the question may still arise: isn't the task too complex and too big? Once again, I suggest: ***don't do it alone***. Many church leaders feel isolated and intimidated. A well-functioning city movement can make a big difference here. When a busy leader invests time and attention in relationships and collaboration with other leaders in the city, this—paradoxically—yields substantial benefits in leading their own community. Take a moment to look at the city's challenges together with other leaders, rather than focusing on the problems within your own church or organization. How many people in the city have not yet been reconciled with God and are struggling with pain, brokenness—
trouble and injustice without experiencing God's peace. What might change in the city if more of God's light were to shine through? Let the Spirit of God grant us a heart of compassion regarding this. Then we will become open to all the support and encouragement available from others who possess greater wisdom or experience. When we feel and experience that we are one Body together with a shared mission, it frees us from competition, insecurity, and isolation. Not that this can be achieved without major challenges and struggles. Yet we can grow in standing together in God's mission with greater appreciation, trust, and even greater unity.

What can a city movement mean for leaders?

A city movement can inspire and facilitate this connection. How can the city movement contribute to the effectiveness of leaders in their own churches?

- *Building and maintaining relationships* is the core activity through which city networks are developed. City movements can only function on the basis of mutual trust. By reaching out to leaders, showing interest, empathizing, and building relationships, trust can be established, making it possible to work together, collaborate, and share people and resources. For the 400 churches in Amsterdam, a pastor is appointed in early 2025 as a "connection catalyst" for two days a week to dedicate more time and attention to this effort on a structural basis.

- *Researching and analysis of the city* encompass history, zoning plans, demographics, social issues, culture, etc. Insights gained from this can be shared and used for the prayer and mission of the entire Church in the

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city. In Amsterdam, various studies have been conducted at the city and neighborhood levels (as mentioned in my dissertation: Brinksma, 2018), in addition to various Impact Audits to measure the impact of faith communities in the social sphere have been done.

- *Building a prayer movement—intercession for the city*—has been facilitated in Amsterdam for many years by the Kingdom Prayernet, with regular meetings and 24/7 prayer for the city and the church. Prayer participants from approximately 80 churches take part.

- *Sharing stories of God's movement in the city.* Where is God at work? What can we celebrate? An important skill is *the discipline of hope:* focusing together on where God's work is visible in the city and sharing this with others as signs of hope. In Amsterdam, this is done in meetings of the various city networks, or for example, in a consultation (in 2018) on the ecosystem of God's Kingdom, featuring many stories from pioneers and initiatives.

- *Learning communities,* where leaders from different churches and backgrounds study together and reflect on topics relevant to urban leaders. Wisdom is shared. Growth in vulnerability and honesty enables leaders to experience a deeper sense of connection. The learning communities of City-to-City Amsterdam and Urban-Life offer good examples of this.

- *Organizing Conferences, summits, consultations, and training sessions* that are relevant to the broader Body of Christ. These also help foster a common language, vision, and leadership development. In this way, unity and mission in the city are strengthened. In Amsterdam, ACCL has organized various citywide summits, consultations, and seminars on themes such as building a Kingdom ecosystem, theology of the city, loneliness, God's mission and the city, the ministry of reconciliation, etc.

- *Representing the entire church in dealings with city officials and other stakeholders,* as well as at important events. In Amsterdam, regular consultations are held regarding the relationship between the Church and city officials (including the mayor), or regarding issues in the social sphere.

- *Bringing people together for fellowship, celebration, and the sharing of information* This is building community. For example, the Amsterdam City Movement organizes an annual free dinner for all church and ministry leaders in the city, along with their partners and teams, while regular breakfast and lunch meetings for leaders are also held.

- *Coaching and care for emotional and mental health.* There is a great deal of pressure on spiritual leadership in the city. Peer support and peer review can prevent much loneliness and burnout (Brinksma, 2024), so this has become a regular part of City-to-City Amsterdam's gatherings.

- *Supporting / coordinating city mission projects and missional centers.* Citywide ministries and events can be supported collectively by people, leaders, and expertise from multiple churches and organizations. In Amsterdam, an annual

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roundtable meeting is organized in which representatives from various networks share what is being done to strengthen collaboration. The "facilitator" explores opportunities for connection and fosters collaboration where possible, including, when necessary, with government agencies, secular organizations, or organizations of other faiths.

Initiating and leading city movements: ecosystem builders

The emergence of city movements varies in every places. There are very different types of leaders who feel called to initiate and facilitate collaboration and connection. The challenge is that there are no structures for the Body of Christ in the city above the level of local churches and organizations.

Yet this is necessary for progress. Traditional organizational structures are not suited to this, but thinking in terms of ecosystems is.[1] There is no organizational hierarchy, so leadership can only be exercised on the basis of trust and the mandate granted by city leaders.

Some characteristics required for this include:

- *Relational leadership:* building, maintaining, and facilitating healthy relationships among Christian leaders.

- *Connecting leadership:* leaders who can bridge highly challenging differences: diversity in theological perspectives, traditions, language groups, hostilities, competition, and disappointments.

- *Servant leadership:* leaders who do not seek to build a name or position for themselves, but who consistently prioritize the well-being and flourishing of all leaders involved, as well as their churches and organizations.

- *Apostolic leadership:* builders of the vision of the Kingdom and God's mission in the city, in a way that creates movement, gives hope, but also builds structures for communication, encounter, and action.

The impetus to move away from the tendency of every church and organization to fulfill God's calling in the city in isolation, toward the idea that God calls the entire Body of Christ together in His mission may seem romantic and utopian. City movements that seek to promote this are far from ideal. In Amsterdam, there has been more than 20 years of deliberate work on urban networks. Progress has been made, and there is more connectedness than ever, but the reality is also that leaders leave and new relationships are formed—must be built with their successors. Integrating the younger generation of successful leaders into existing urban networks is not a given. There are also still many pioneers and leaders in the city mission who become disillusioned or experience burnout. Leaders' busy schedules pose a major challenge to building city movements. Funding is also not straightforward, as there are not many funds that invest in urban ecosystems. Developing urban networks and the desire to be one Body of Christ in the city is a long-term process involving many disappointments and challenges in building trust and synergy within the city. Yet where it succeeds, we see greater joy and fruitfulness emerging. It fits into God's movement within the Church today. That is why I urge us to give this a chance and invest in it.

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Notes

1 Ecosystems are environments in which organisms (organizations) of all kinds are interdependent. In an ecosystem, certain elements ensure that all organisms can thrive and together create a healthy and productive environments

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