

Living the Gospel in Culture and Cities

Where: Seoul, Korea

When: Monday, 27 October 2025

1. Executive Summary / Abstract

This report provides a comprehensive summary of the plenary session titled "Living the Gospel in Culture and Cities." The discussion featured three panellists, Chris Elisara, Cinthia Hieber, and Darrell Bock, who collectively addressed the urgent need for a biblically rooted and practically embodied Christian witness within the world's rapidly expanding urban centres. The core message of the session was a multifaceted call for the global church to re-engage with cities, not as problems to be solved, but as divinely ordained spaces for human flourishing. The session established a profound theological foundation for urban mission, arguing that God's love for cities is evident from creation to the eschaton. This was followed by a passionate appeal for radical inclusivity, urging faith communities to become places of "intentional visibility" for the marginalised and vulnerable who are often rendered invisible by the pace and scale of city life. Finally, the panel outlined a strategic posture for engagement in complex, pluralistic urban societies, advocating for a "faithful presence" characterised by humble service, relational integrity, and a persuasive, respectful witness. The overarching conclusion is a call to action for the global church: to weep over its cities as Jesus did, to see and empower the forgotten, and to serve the urban landscape with a grace-filled witness that seeks to transform cities one changed heart at a time.

2. Detailed Summary of Plenary Session Content

The plenary session explored the challenges and opportunities presented by the 21st-century phenomenon of rapid urbanisation and the rise of megacities. The moderator framed the discussion by noting that urban centres are magnets for rising generations seeking purpose, jobs, and community, setting the stage for the panellists to offer theological, personal, and strategic insights for ministry in this context.

A Theological Foundation for Urban Mission

Chris Elisara began the discussion by establishing a foundational theological principle: **God loves cities, always has, and always will.** He argued that creation itself is the material manifestation of God's love, and the first act of this creative love was to design a neighbourhood, Eden, as a place for humanity to flourish in relationship with Him. Since cities are essentially an aggregation of neighbourhoods, God's love for human community and place is inherently a love for the city. Chris drew a line from the garden city of Genesis to the restored garden city of Revelation, portraying the biblical narrative as one that begins and ends with God designing places for human flourishing.

He then brought this grand theological arc into sharp, contemporary focus by pointing to Jesus weeping over Jerusalem. Christ saw a city designed for flourishing but failing its purpose, and his sorrow demonstrated a divine heartbreak over the brokenness of urban spaces. This moment of lament, however, was followed by the redemptive action of the cross. Chris defined the gospel as "the kingdom of God breaking into the world," an act that sets everything right again. The gospel, therefore, is not just for people, but for everything, including places and cities.

Chris concluded with a direct challenge to the World Evangelical Alliance and its members: with cities growing so rapidly, is the global church ready? He questioned whether the church possesses the necessary theology, mindset, and skillset to meet the challenge of transforming cities. He

finished not with a note of despair, but with a call to hope, reminding the audience that through the gospel, believers have the tools to partner with Jesus in the transformation of their urban environments.

A Call for Radical Inclusion and Intentional Visibility

Cynthia Hieber's contribution shifted the focus from the theological to the deeply personal and practical, addressing how faith communities can become places of genuine belonging for those who "fall between the cracks" in urban contexts. She shared her powerful testimony of living with a stutter, a condition triggered by her parents' divorce at age six. This led to immense personal suffering, including a suicide attempt as a child and a period of atheism. Even after a profound conversion experience that miraculously improved her fluency from 5% to 80%, she wrestled with God for 20 years, questioning why she was not healed completely.

The turning point came after she experienced the power of support groups in Germany. Returning to her home in Paraguay, she found no such community. Her perspective was radically altered when a pastor showed her a suicide note from a twelve-year-old boy who had taken his own life because of his stutter. In that moment, Cynthia understood her own continued struggle as a divine calling; God had left her with "the 20%" to empower her to create the very support group she had been searching for.

From this experience, Cynthia articulated a powerful principle for urban ministry: **in cities where people feel invisible, faith communities must become places of intentional visibility.** She urged the church to be as radical as Jesus, who deliberately saw and touched those whom society had cast aside. This requires moving beyond accidental or superficial inclusion to a deep understanding of diverse needs, whether related to speech differences, cognitive conditions, autism, or physical disabilities. It necessitates training leaders and volunteers and, most importantly, listening deeply to the experiences of the marginalised. She concluded by stating that God reveals His glory through what the world calls weakness. The church's role is not merely to include people, but to see them as God sees them and actively encourage them to live out their divine calling.

A Posture of Faithful Presence in a Pluralistic World

Daryl Bock addressed the strategic question of how the church can effectively transform urban culture. He asserted that transformation does not come through laws or government action alone, which are insufficient in a fallen world. Rather, **cities are transformed through changed hearts** as people reconnect with the living God.

He framed his main topic around the challenge of living as the church in a pluralistic society. He described pluralism as a chaotic "Middle Eastern bazaar" of competing worldviews and lifestyles, where the church's calling is to help people make sense of the chaos. The primary method for this is what he termed "**faithful presence.**" Drawing on Ephesians 6, he reminded the audience that the Christian battle is not against "flesh and blood", people are not the enemy but the goal, but against spiritual forces that operate unseen. The church is engaged in rescuing people who often do not even realise they are in trouble.

Daryl affirmed Chris's creation-based theology, adding that humanity was made to be "hummers", to collaborate with God to make creation "hum" and flourish. Referencing Jeremiah 29, he noted that this calling to serve and seek the welfare of the city was given in the context of pagan Babylon, an exemplary model for engagement in non-Christian spaces.

A key part of faithful presence is recognising that public space is pluralistic, and every person, atheist, Muslim, Buddhist, or fellow Christian, has a right to be there because they are sacred,

dignified image-bearers of God. This reality means the church must operate through a ministry of persuasion, not of privilege. Even when possessing the truth, Christians must persuade others relationally. He defined evangelism as the act of "creating categories people do not have," such as the unique category of Jesus as the "Creator God incarnate." This creative, persuasive work can only be done relationally, with a tone that matters. Citing 1 Peter 3, he concluded that this witness must be offered with meekness and respect, as the manner of our engagement is inseparable from the message of the gospel itself.

3. Main Topic and Core Message

The **main topic** of the panel discussion was **developing a robust and relevant missiology for the 21st-century city**. The session explored the theological, relational, and strategic imperatives for the global church as it confronts the realities of unprecedented urbanisation and cultural pluralism.

The **core message** was that effective Christian witness in modern urban centres requires a holistic approach that integrates a deep **theology of place**, a radical **commitment to the marginalised**, and a humble **posture of public engagement**. The panellists collectively argued that the church must first see the city as God sees it, a place He loves and intends for flourishing. Second, it must actively seek out and empower the "invisible" populations within its neighbourhoods, embodying the inclusive heart of Jesus. Finally, it must navigate the complexities of a pluralistic society with a "faithful presence," seeking to transform the city not through power or legislation, but through the patient, respectful, and relational work of changing hearts with the gospel.

4. Primary Arguments, Key Principles, and Theological Points

A Theology of the City

- **Divine Affection for Cities:** The foundational principle is that God possesses a deep and abiding love for cities as centres of human community and culture.
- **Creation as Neighbourhood:** God's first creative act for humanity was to build a neighbourhood (Eden), establishing a blueprint for places of flourishing.
- **The Gospel for Places:** The gospel is not only for the salvation of souls but for the redemption of all of creation, including the social and physical fabric of cities.
- **Christ's Heart for the City:** Jesus's lament over Jerusalem reveals God's sorrow for the brokenness of urban life and His desire for its restoration.
- **Urban Hope:** The biblical narrative culminates in a restored garden city, positioning the city as the ultimate site of redeemed human flourishing.

A Ministry of Intentional Visibility

- **The Danger of Urban Invisibility:** The scale and anonymity of cities mean many people, particularly those with physical, mental, or social differences, become unseen and unheard.
- **Radical Inclusivity:** The church is called to emulate the radical, boundary-breaking ministry of Jesus, who intentionally sought out and valued those society marginalised.
- **Inclusion is not Accidental:** Creating truly welcoming communities requires deliberate effort, including training leaders, understanding diverse needs, and listening deeply to the vulnerable.

- **Strength in Weakness:** God's glory is often revealed most powerfully through human weakness, and personal brokenness can become a powerful catalyst for ministry.
- **Beyond Inclusion to Empowerment:** The goal is not simply to have marginalised people present in church but to see them as God sees them and empower them to live out their God-given calling.

A Posture of Faithful Presence

- **Heart-Change over Legislation:** The ultimate transformation of a city comes from the spiritual regeneration of its people, not primarily through political or legal means.
- **Navigating Pluralism:** Christians are called to navigate the chaotic "bazaar" of competing worldviews with grace and wisdom, serving the city rather than withdrawing from or warring with it.
- **People are the Goal, not the Enemy:** The Christian's struggle is against spiritual darkness, not against other people. Our neighbours are the very people we are called to love, serve, and rescue.
- **Ministry of Persuasion, not Privilege:** In a pluralistic public square where everyone has a right to be, the church must persuade, not coerce. Witness must be earned through relationship and respect.
- **Tone is Indispensable:** The gospel must be communicated with meekness and respect (1 Peter 3), as the tone of the messenger is inseparable from the truth of the message.

5. Conclusion and Call to Action

The plenary session concluded with a clear and compelling call to action for the global church to fundamentally re-evaluate and reinvigorate its engagement with urban centres. The speakers collectively challenged leaders to move beyond outdated models of ministry and embrace a posture that is theologically robust, compassionately inclusive, and strategically humble. The primary call to action is for the church to become a tangible expression of God's love for the city. This involves three integrated imperatives: firstly, to develop and embed a positive theology of cities that inspires hope and action; secondly, to actively dismantle barriers to belonging by becoming communities of "intentional visibility" where the weakest are honoured and empowered; and thirdly, to equip every believer to live as a "faithful presence" in their vocations and neighbourhoods, serving the common good and offering a persuasive witness to the gospel. The urgent task is for the church to see its city, weep for its brokenness, and then roll up its sleeves to participate in God's redemptive work within it.

Invitation for Further Contribution

Your voice is still a vital part of this global conversation. We invite you to add your reflections, insights, and questions to this discussion by visiting the following link: <https://weafeedback.com/monday-27/>

1. Scroll down to the Panel session titles,
2. When ready, select 'Start Recording' and provide your input (responding to the questions below.
3. When done, select 'Stop'
4. No need to provide personal details
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To engage with the report and contextualise the content for your ministry, access Spock.chat (if you have not yet registered, click here - <https://app.spock.chat/conference/wea>) It is highly recommended that you personalise your AI before engaging with the reports. To do so, select the **'Personalise your AI'** agent in the Menu Bar and follow the instructions.