

God loves gentrification

Guest post by [Daniel José Camacho](#)

July 8, 2015

“God loves cities.” This has been a mantra that has guided a new generation of evangelicals who have sought to take their Christian faith into the inner cities and urban centers of the United States. There are more people to evangelize there, the rationale goes. A previous generation of Christians mistakenly sheltered themselves from the diverse and “sinful” cities. Why cut churches off from the centers of art, commerce, and culture? Moreover, the bible calls Christians to seek the welfare of their cities (Jeremiah 29:4-7). Yet, the questions I want to raise are these: what does it mean that the popularity of predominately white church plants in inner cities has grown precisely as gentrification has spiked? What does it mean that many have been inspired to seek the welfare of cities precisely as a growing number of people have been economically displaced from these cities? The theologies that romanticize this shift into the city need to be seriously scrutinized alongside the material realities.

In the 1990s and 2000s, while many evangelicals changed their minds about cities and moved in, cities and suburbs also changed. According to the [Confronting Suburban Poverty in America](#) study, by 2012 there were more people living below the poverty line in U.S. suburbs (16.5 million) than in cities (13.5 million). These changes are reflected in virtually all of the major metropolitan areas around the country. [Fully 88 percent of Atlanta’s poor live in the suburbs...and between 2000 and 2011, Atlanta’s suburban poor population grew by 159 percent while the city’s poor population remained essentially flat.](#) In Chicago’s suburbs, the number of those living in poverty [increased](#) over 99% in the same time span, roughly 7 times more than the city’s rate. New York’s suburban poverty [grew](#) approximately 14 times more than the city’s poverty between 2000 and 2011.

Suburban Poverty Chart

Even though our cities and suburbs have dramatically changed, our traditional narratives about them largely have not. Suburbs are imagined as white and affluent. Cities are imagined as the places that need social justice. Yet, places like Ferguson, Missouri, shatter this simple picture. Ferguson is a suburb of St. Louis that [saw its poor population increase by 99% within a decade](#). Beyond being a problem of pure economics, Ferguson exposed to this nation how America's new suburbs are afflicted by a more complicated web of inequalities.

All of this hits close to home for me. Growing up in a predominately Black, Latino, and immigrant suburb on Long Island, I have found the realities of my community invisibilized and ignored within many paradigms concerning "urban ministry" and "justice ministry." This, it is important to admit, is also a problem that extends beyond churches. Many non-profits, social services, and streams of funding are still [directed overwhelmingly and disproportionately at urban centers](#).

The massive and systemic scale of these geographical realities go beyond intentionality. I'm not necessarily interested in critiquing the sincerity of church planters. Beyond intentions, there need to be honest assessments and a deep soul-searching about the relationship between theologies, church practices, and these material conditions. To be sure, evangelical church plants are not the only ones implicated in this. Established mainline churches and other places of worship need to critically examine themselves as well. Nevertheless, evangelicals have recently articulated some of the clearest and most aggressive justifications for entering and developing cities.

Jeremiah 29:4-7 is a biblical text often used to articulate a theology about cities. It reads:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

Ironically, Jeremiah's words are addressed to a people who have been violently displaced. This scripture encourages God's people to seek the welfare of the city while in *Babylon*, not simply in a city nearby with other young professionals. What does it mean that this text is used in ways which erase its geographical contexts, its violence and power differentials, and which consequently erase the displacements of our day?

What if this text were seen through the lens of Latin@ immigrants and their kids in the U.S.? For many Latin@s, the United States' trade agreements, drug policies, and [violent interventions](#) in Latin America played no small hand in our families' migrations. Yet, we grow up in a country where many either despise our presence here or render it invisible. In this light, Jeremiah's words are not about privileged movement and expansion; in fact, they are much tougher to swallow: "Let your kids seek the welfare of this city, even though it was the cause of your exile."

Many romanticized narratives about ministry in the city float above the ground and are based on assumptions which are 30 years too old. At their worst, they present a God who has a preferential option for cities and their development, a God of Gentrification. Given our situation, I'm inevitably left asking: does God love suburbs? Or, more importantly, does God love people more than property? Does God love the people priced out of Brooklyn? By no means do I think the solution is to simply shift attention from cities back exclusively to suburbs. And I definitely don't want to downplay the poverty, injustices, and need for ministry within inner cities. The problem is how missiologically visions remain—even unconsciously—locked within logics of property, development, and community-planning that don't prioritize the well-being of more vulnerable neighbors.

Multicultural paradigms, by including dashes of color within a church or its representational leadership, do not necessarily address the problems either. The focus on representation can mask and overlook the concrete inequalities plaguing massive numbers of poorer black and brown people. Neither do "Incarnational" or "Parish" models of ministry do much to address the problems when they simply focus on connecting to the surrounding community. If we only encourage our churches to be in tune with the surrounding community, then the result will be segregation because that's the United States.

Surely, how churches and ministries are implicated in these economic/geographical shifts is extremely complicated. Its massive scale and the sheer strength of economic forces can be paralyzing. Purity is impossible. But that's not a reason to do nothing. Worst of all is to say that these inequalities are a natural part of God's creation! It's irresponsible and anti-Christ to say, "This is just the way the world is." The world—like our cities and suburbs—has changed many times.

The *Atlantic* piece, "[Suburbs and the New American Poverty](#)," talks about Rev. Harriet Bradley who felt called by God to address the need to expand public transportation in Atlanta's suburbs. More recently, [another piece](#) (brought to my attention by Amaryah Shaye and John Thorton) has highlighted how community land trusts can help keep housing prices down in rapidly gentrifying cities such as Austin, Texas. These are small examples, small incarnations, of alternative possibilities.

It's time to give up a faux Incarnationalism which doesn't touch geography, which doesn't touch property and the inequalities that flow from its management and development. Otherwise, we end up with a God of the default. This God seems to currently love cities but not the people being left out.

Daniel José Camacho is currently a Masters of Divinity student at Duke Divinity School. Originally from Uniondale, NY, Daniel graduated from Calvin College in May 2013 with a B.A. in Philosophy. His writing has been published in Perspectives Journal of Reformed Thought and his commentary has appeared in New York Times. Daniel is pursuing ordination in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). You can follow him on [Twitter](#) and his [Facebook page](#).