

Transforming the City, by Eldin Villafane

reviewed by [Carl S. Dudley](#) in the [December 4, 2002](#) issue

Thumbnail sketches of six pioneering efforts to bridge the gap between traditional seminary programs and the needs of leaders in multiethnic urban communities open this book. An excellent essay on the case study method by Robert A. Evans and Alice Frazer Evans introduces these sketches. They are not the "slice of life" the authors promise, but rather descriptive reports from two points of view: that of a program executive and that of an anonymous reporter presuming to provide objective information.

The sketches are informative, suggesting the broad challenges that confront each program, its sponsors and the students involved. But they are bloodless when compared to the raw honesty of interactive case studies using recognizable characters who engage in believable dialogue and seek to resolve complex problems.

Between the historical introduction by Bruce W. Jackson that follows and the epilogue by Eldin Villafane, an all-star cast of theological educators reflects on the six programs. These reflections are particularly helpful for seminary leaders who are wrestling with cross-cultural issues, reflecting on such things as curriculum content, collaborative pedagogy and contemporary urban demands that challenge historic academic credentials.

Unfortunately, the authors do not address the gritty issues that those who are in the trenches, training urban religious leaders, must deal with: issues such as the relevancy of the gospel in various ethnic, national, racial and linguistic communities, or the power of God's word as it speaks across differences in class, gender, generation and family conditions. We need to confront institutional dilemmas, as these writers do, but we also need forceful advocacy from the perspectives of street-level church leaders.

The cases in this book are focused on issues of urban justice. From the first description of out-of-touch academics to the final portrait of Saul Alinsky-style organizing, these authors are united in their commitment to making God's "kingdom come . . . on earth as it is in heaven." But they do not address the theological divide that haunts justice-driven teachers: the divide between many deeply committed, indigenous city church leaders rooted in a conservative, often fundamentalist and world-denying faith and people like these authors, with their liberal to liberationist theologies.

This book offers a solid grounding for engaging such issues. The challenge of theological education for urban leaders is much greater, the theology much broader and the resources much richer than this volume allows. But reframing education for urban ministry remains one of the supreme challenges for the church, and *Transforming the City* is a good place to begin.