

‘Megacity’ growth in China points to an alarming trend

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=5736>

We see the growing trend toward density in American cities, but nowhere is the density of a “megacity” more exemplified than in the rapid growth in China.

In an article in the Delhi Guardian, authors Paul Webster and Jason Burke describe a project currently under construction in the southwest China city of Chengdu as a “behemoth.” The authors wrote, “When finished later this year, its developers proudly boast, it will be the world’s largest stand-alone building. The New Century Global Centre is a leisure complex that will house two 1,000-room five-star hotels, an ice rink, a luxury Imax cinema, vast shopping malls and a 20,000-capacity indoor swimming pool with 400 meters of “coastline” and a fake beach the size of 10 football pitches(sic) complete with its own seaside village.”

Described as a “potential vision of the future,” Chinese officials see the massive project as a response to the rapid urbanization of their country. Rural families have been pouring into cities in search of jobs at such a rate that the Chinese are having difficulty building infrastructure quickly enough to accommodate them.

The problem is more acute in China, but the same thing is happening in other countries like India, Mexico, Indonesia and Bangladesh. The number of megacities with more than 10 million in population is expected to double in ten to twenty years.

The authors noted, “optimists see a new network of powerful, stable and prosperous city states, each bigger than many small countries, where the benefits of urban living, the relative ease of delivering basic services compared to rural zones and new civic identities combine to raise living standards for billions. Pessimists see the opposite: a dystopic future where huge numbers of people fight over scarce resources in sprawling, divided, anarchic “non-communities” ravaged by disease and violence.

The numbers in some cities are staggering to comprehend. By 2030, Delhi is expected to reach 26 million, in Mumbai, 30 million. Experts are not expecting a utopia to emerge as a result of the growth. Instead, they are predicting poverty, traffic gridlock, lack of drinking water and an inability to treat sewage.

In China, the problem has become so serious that “voracious development” is leading to seizure of land. The Chinese government has even gone to rural areas to improve living conditions enough to keep people from moving to the cities.

The authors wrote, “even if the demands for power, sanitation and security can be met, however, the new cities, whether of 30 million or five million inhabitants, present a cultural challenge: how to establish a sense of community in huge and complex societies.”

What wasn't mentioned in the article was the role that religion played in the development of these megacities. It is noteworthy that the description of the New Century Global Centre didn't include any religious facilities, but we would expect that in a country that discourages religion. However, we are also seeing the same thing in mixed-used developments in America.

Believe it or not, there are plans, or at least expectations, that the United States will begin to develop massive regions as well. In a 2002-2004 document entitled, "America 2050," five major outcomes for America were outlined: "a national framework for prosperity, growth and competitiveness; a world class multimodal transportation system; protected environmental landscapes and coastal estuaries; economic and social opportunities for all members of society; and globally competitive megaregions." The document identified ten areas around the country to develop into concentrations of populations.

That, given what we have seen in the last three years, makes this document a bit spooky in its manifestations. Massive development and rural cleansing may or may not come to pass, but churches in America need to be paying close attention to how these things might develop. There is a real possibility that there will be few, if any, places where churches can physically exist to maintain their presence in their communities.

There are already examples of large mixed-development projects in America, and there would probably be more if the economy had not collapsed. Though none are as large as the New Century Global Centre, the concept is the same. Limited space; high land costs; and the crowding out of all but the largest developers who are able to finance massive construction projects; the growth of complex regulations and the growing hostility toward the church will make the job of keeping the church as a vital part of our communities as difficult as establishing any sense of community of all.

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