

ARE WE ANTIOCH YET?

Edward Keith Pousson

The notion that Singapore is the Antioch of Asia has inspired some and irked others

I understand it goes back to a prophecy by David Yonggi Cho and a statement by Billy Graham. I first came across it in 1983. My wife Lai Kheng and I were on assignment in America. I had previously lived and served in Malaysia and we were planning to return there after a few years. I was following Patrick Johnstone's *Operation World* prayer guide and I came across the entry on Singapore. It said, "Singapore is the Antioch of Asia." I showed it to Lai Kheng. It was a defining moment. Then and there we decided that, when we returned to Asia, Singapore would be our home.

We have lived here for 18 years. We have no illusions that we can make it happen. But we believe the prophecy and want to see it fulfilled, regardless how small our part may be. Some modest Singaporeans think it's a bit arrogant. How can Singapore claim to be *the* Antioch of Asia? Well, in the first place, Singapore didn't claim it. The notion came from outsiders. Second, it doesn't mean that Singapore is the only one. God can surface many Antiochs of Asia. But in deference to the modest, I usually speak of Singapore as "an Antioch for Asia."

Now the title of this article is, "Are we Antioch yet?" The answer depends on your definition of Antioch. If you compare demographics, you can pat yourself on the back and say yes, we are Antioch: a

link between East and West, a multi-racial, multi-cultural urban centre, a thriving, growing, missionary-sending church. And so on. But demographics alone don't make us Antioch. What is the legacy of Antioch in Acts and in antiquity? What would be the benchmark in Singapore's becoming *Antioch*?

Antioch produced the first *intentional, cross-cultural* mission outreach that involved a church and was not a result of persecution. This was the 'official' beginning of the Gentile mission. The story of Acts begins with united prayer in Jerusalem. Prayer and fasting triggers a new beginning in Antioch (Acts 13:1-4). This is the forgotten secret of Acts. Effective ministry to the world flows out of faithful ministry to the Lord. This is the *Antioch Environment* and the *Antioch Effect*. Take a closer look.

THE ANTIOCH ENVIRONMENT

The city

First, the *city*. It's not hard to see why God chose Antioch as the new centre of mission. It was the capital of Syria and the third largest city in the Roman Empire. Its people, half a million strong, were mostly Gentiles and migrants. The city was cosmopolitan, multiracial, and multicultural. It was a centre of commerce on the main highway connecting East and West. A mirror image of Singapore in many ways.

The church

Second, the *church*. They were mostly Gentile disciples (Acts 11:19-30;

15:1). They met primarily in homes and occasionally in public. Antioch became and remained a strategic centre of Christianity for the first few centuries of church history. Before AD 500, half the city's population was Christian.

The clergy

Third, the *clergy*. I use this term for convenience. Clergy-laity distinctions didn't exist yet. Luke mentions five leaders by name. Judging from their origins, they were an expatriate, multicultural team. They reflect the demographics of Antioch. They were probably a mission team establishing the church there. This is certainly true of Barnabas and Saul (Acts 11:22-26). Lucius, being from Cyrene, may have been one of the founders (11:20). On these grounds, I conclude that these five men were both church and mission leaders. Most significantly, they were united in prayer and fasting, and sensitive to the Spirit. Is Singapore Antioch yet? Are our *church and mission* leaders united and mutually affirming of each other as equal members of the body? Whether local born or foreign born?

The climate

Fourth, the *climate*: "...they were worshipping the Lord and fasting" (Acts 13:2). This is the most important dimension of the *Antioch Environment*. The leaders were *ministering to the Lord* in a disciplined way, which included fasting and probably singing and praying. Luke and Acts repeatedly establish a link between spiritual discipline and spiritual power. The church of Acts has both a spiritual life

continued on next page

and an institutional life. The spiritual life is primary. Some churches today are top-heavy institutions that quench the Spirit. Others are all Spirit and no order. Either extreme is a disaster.

It's almost impossible to minister in a service where people have not worshipped. I don't mean singing a list of songs, but truly *ministering to God*, as in Antioch. Luke establishes a principle. When we minister to God he ministers to us: "While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said..." (Acts 13:2-3). Antioch models the three-fold priority of every church and every believer. First, they minister to the Lord. Second, they minister to one another. And third, they minister to the world. In that order! This brings us to the *Antioch Effect*.

THE ANTIOCH EFFECT

The call

First, the call. Acts 13:1-4 confirms that, if we pray, the Lord of the harvest will send out his chosen workers (Matthew 9:38). God had already called Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13:2; Galatians 1:15-16). God revealed his call to Saul at Damascus several years earlier. Now in Antioch, as they ministered to God, the Spirit intervened and activated a call on earth that had already been settled in heaven: "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2).

Occasionally I meet young people who are convinced that God has called them to be missionaries. But nobody understands them. No one encourages them. No one sends them. Take courage, I say, from Paul. Several years had passed since he heard the call. But the day of activation finally came. He was recognised and released into his destiny. There is a time and a season, a day and a moment when Holy Spirit comes in power to activate gifts and the calling that he has placed within us. Antioch is such a time and place where people are appointed and gifts activated, not on the basis of institutional credentials, but by the leading of the Spirit. Is Singapore Antioch yet?

The confirmation

Second, the Timing is one thing. The confirmation of the body is another. Barnabas and Saul knew they were called. God knew it all along. But it was essential

that their fellow workers recognise and resonate with their calling. Practically speaking, if you are the only one in your church who thinks you have a certain ministry, you need to evaluate. Perhaps it's just a matter of timing. So what are we to do while waiting for God's timing and the affirmation of the body? Antioch has the answer. Be patient. Serve faithfully and fruitfully wherever you are. Minister to God and to others. That special moment of activation will come soon enough—maybe sooner than you'd wish.

The commission

The third *Antioch Effect* is the *commission*. Who has the authority to send out missionaries? Is it the local church or the mission agency? According to Acts, the ultimate authority rests with the Holy Spirit. He is the mission director (1:8). He selects, summons, and sends workers into God's harvest. But as we learn from Antioch, church and mission leaders have joint responsibility in this process. They are to unite, serve together, minister to God, and to one another. In that positive relational environment, they are to *identify* and *set apart* God's chosen workers for his mission. The Holy Spirit demanded this of the leaders in Antioch (13:2). When the Spirit *speaks* and *sends*, the church *sets apart* and *releases*; even if the sent ones happen to be the senior leaders. Missionaries in Acts are church-based but not church-bound! Are we Antioch yet?

The cross-cultural team

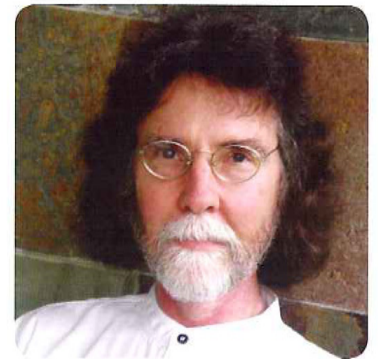
A fourth *Antioch Effect* is the emergence of the *cross-cultural* or *apostolic team*. This is a mobile, pioneering, church planting team. It has freedom of movement in association with local churches. It takes centre stage for the rest of Acts. It modeled itself after the Jewish proselytising bands, which, according to Jesus, "crossed sea and land to make a single convert" (Matthew 23:15). As the local churches in Acts are the prototype for local churches today, so Paul's apostolic team is the prototype for mission organisations today. Both of these structures together make up the church that Jesus builds. We don't mimic the first-century forms of either structure. We try to follow the principles of each.

Mission agencies, therefore, are not *para-church*, but *part-of-church*; part of the body. They are not undesirable, interim contingencies arising to do what local churches fail or refuse to do. In Acts and church history, they didn't emerge when the church was weak, but when

the church was strong. They are equal partners and jointly responsible in God's mission. They are mutually accountable to one another and ultimately accountable to the Spirit and to Jesus, the head of the church. They should not contain, control, or compete with each other. Rather, they should pray, plan, and partner *together* as equal members of the body to impact the world for Jesus. This is the lesson of Antioch.

What is the legacy of Antioch? The answer is simple and striking. Before Antioch, Christianity was a sect within Judaism, confined to the Jewish race and culture, with few exceptions. After Antioch, Christianity crossed the cultural chasm, marched into the Gentile world, and emerged as a global faith for *all peoples*. Paul's report to the Antioch church after his first missionary tour summarises the *Antioch Effect*: God "opened a door of faith for the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27). Antioch became a bridge to the unreached peoples of the world. That is her legacy in church and mission history.

So then, is Singapore Antioch yet? Will she do in Asia what Antioch did in the Roman Empire? Will church and mission leaders unite in prayer, in action, and in kingdom alliances, until God sends out his mighty harvest force from Singapore to the unreached peoples of Asia and beyond? Will Singapore's missionaries become a bridge to people of other faiths, who are ripe for harvest but resistant to Christianity in its Western forms? Will they de-westernise Christianity for the unreached peoples of Asia as Paul de-Judaised it for the Gentiles of his day? It's your destiny. You decide.



Edward Keith Pousson has lived and served for 20 years in Asia and taught in theological schools in Singapore since 1991. He and his wife Lai Kheng have two adult sons and one teenage daughter. This article is pre-copyright material from the manuscript of a forthcoming book on Acts entitled, *The Church that Jesus Builds*. The author retains copyright and publishing rights. (Ed shared this message on 26 June at GoForth NMC 2008 prayer meeting.)