

# Perspectives



## Stories of Love and Horror

**M**ANY OF US, NO DOUBT, HAVE BOTH HORROR STORIES AND LOVE STORIES TO TELL of the city. Growing up in inner-city Detroit, I was the object of three muggings—equal opportunity events before their time, by white, black, and Hispanic gangs. Living for a time and returning often to Washington, DC, I have had a love-hate relationship with that city, attracted by its beauty and repelled by its ugliness. Watching the friendly and industrious ethnic neighborhoods of Cleveland change into anonymous neon purveyors of pornography played no small part in turning my father from a young liberal activist to an old hard-line conservative. Yet, would I give up my years in the old city of Heidelberg, or the joys of the Twin Cities?

What is the gospel, for and in the city? Perhaps *the* crisis of faith in the Old Testament was the transition from nomadic to agricultural life. The prophets and the Deuteronomists, especially, wrestle with the question of whether or not nomadic Yahwism can survive the move into agricultural Canaan without succumbing either to the fertility gods of the countryside or the drive for power in the emerging cities. It was not at all clear that this was possible. Yet, Yahwism did survive—changed in the process, but retaining its insistence on Yahweh's oneness and on his unique demand for justice and righteousness on the one hand and his self-giving love on the other. The church got along for millennia living in an agricultural world, dotted by occasional urban capitals and power-centers, proclaiming the biblical faith in communities that still had much in common with those of the Bible.

Not until recently has history seen a transition equal to humanity's move from nomadic to agricultural existence. Now, the move is to urban industrialization and cybernetics, a sociological and demographic move paralleling and perhaps surpassing the radicality of the one known to the Old Testament; the verdict is not yet in as to whether or not the Christian faith can survive the present upheaval. What can be renegotiated as we think about the proclamation of God and gospel in the modern pluralistic city? What is non-negotiable? Does anybody care? How, in the meantime, do we minister to the people who live and work in the city?

The church will need all the help it can get in answering these questions. *Word & World* seeks to make a small contribution with this issue.

In a semi-homiletical perspective, *Walter Brueggemann* remembers those who, in the Bible and literature, remembered Rachel's children, the innocent in

every generation. In our concern for the urban innocent, Christians, says Brueggemann, are still called to remember.

*James A. Nelson's* perspective piece is something of an autobiographical reflection on life and ministry in inner-city America. Despite his (often terrifying) experiences and disappointments, Nelson remains remarkably hopeful. His emphasis on community and friendship puts him in the same field of interest as Martha Stortz (see below).

*Diane Jacobson* opens the articles section by sketching the biblical view of the city, demonstrating the city's ambiguous role in biblical history and theology. She goes beyond a merely historical interest to suggest implications for ministry among those who see the city in the light of the gospel.

*James W. Lewis* offers those involved in urban ministry some historical resources for thinking about their work and their context. His analysis is both helpful and surprisingly encouraging for mainline churches in urban areas.

*Martha Ellen Stortz* combines observations from recent liberal political philosophies, Aristotle, and Hannah Arendt, and proposes friendship as an essential ingredient for life in the modern city.

*Cornish R. Rogers* examines the churches' responses to the 1992 Los Angeles riots as a case study of how Christian organizations and communities react to urban crisis. His analysis raises the question of whether and how immediate enthusiasm will boil down to actual long-term good.

*Randy A. Nelson* analyses urban developments and the various interpretations thereof by recent writers. He concludes that the church is uniquely suited to meet the challenges of the city, the new frontier. All it takes is the will.

*Loyde H. Hartley* provides a valuable resource for students and/or practitioners of urban ministry: a categorized and partially annotated bibliography of books and articles. His final section lists Lutheran contributions to this work.

Talking Face to Face on urban gun control are *John Helgeland* and *Eric Jorstad*—not so much pro and con as offering different perspectives on this daunting issue. In *Texts in Context* *Paul R. Sponheim* reviews the Old Testament lessons for Advent and Christmas Day, "with the city in view." He looks at the texts as a group, attempting to identify what they say together that might be legitimately applicable to the cities we know.

Outside the theme, *Egil Grislis* considers Martin Luther's spirituality, an avenue of investigation that he thinks opens up the whole of Luther, teacher and person, good and bad.

F.J.G.