

PREFACE TO THE WHITE PAPER

This initial paper came out of two days of work by a few friends to try to understand cities in a way that was 1) not currently available to us and 2) helpful for the work we are all doing in trying to both understand and unite our cities. At the outset, it should be said that there are always limitations to these kinds of endeavors. Not the least of which being the biases and blind spots that we (as the progenitors of these ideas) bring to the table. Even the groups and demographics we are supposed to represent could be disappointed in our offering. So it is that we have only done our best, to make a start.

We do not consider these ideas, the conclusions, or even the data to be definitive or complete. Instead, we have endeavored to open the discussion. To do that rare work of not just wondering or criticizing but trying to build a comprehensive system to seriously try to answer the questions being asked (understanding that the first attempt is rarely the best). We ourselves would reserve the right to see the start as missing key components, and even leading us to a wrong conclusion. We leave that discussion to the thoughtful people who will read and interact with this work. And we are happy for it.

After a significant wave of outside input from a team of additional experts, I am leaving the original paper essentially intact, in its first form. Again, not because I think it is without its problems, but because it will serve as a starting point and should stay in its original form so that we can all see the progress that (we hope) will be made from the first iteration to the last. Rather than editing it as we go.

Having said that, there are a few notable objections that even now warrant comment, and either clarify or improve the paper you are about to read. We are indebted to the second wave of readers who gave such important feedback.

Maps Are Not Reality

Reviewers from very different traditions converged on the same instinct: a comprehensive analytical grid risks confusing measurable connectivity with cultural understanding. We agree. It was Alfred Korzybski who first said: “The map is not the territory.” And they are right to make this point. The matrix we offer, and the data that reports on it, is just a map. Or as Allan Watts said, “The menu is not the meal.” A risk here is that the grid we have created and the data we mine would give a soulless depiction of our cities, which are, of course, more than those measurements. They are places of meaning, shaped by the stories we tell, and by spiritual realities that are harder to codify but which may be even more important to the life, culture, and existential reality of a place. We have taken that advice on board and included a narrative dimension to the assessment.

Still, this component is weaker. It is my belief that we are actually more naturally conversant in these ideas, and it is the data and the systems mapping that is more of a mystery to most of us. So it is that the map and the menu are still very valuable if you want to find your way around. The narrative and spiritual inquiry of a city is a locally owned process of interpretation, dialogue, and discernment. Both of these things together can describe the anatomy and the soul of a city.

Meaning Matters

I would also concede that there is a missing meaning layer to the work we are proposing. But again, that limitation only serves to accentuate the value it does bring. For me, the assessment would serve our cities in the same way a personality test serves an individual. It certainly does not define the person, but gives new language and new insight to the person (and the people around them) as to who they are. But that meaning must be assigned through some other process. That is to say, this kind of assessment does not try to measure our stories but gives us data points to understand our stories in a new way. For me, it is a feature, not a bug, and the project is not trying to define anything, only take a diagnostic look at the whole, especially uncovering aspects of our cities that would otherwise be ignored.

Anatomy and Soul

Finally, there are spiritual realities that again, are not going to be measured here (or perhaps anywhere else), which are arguably more important by far. The depth and breadth of our prayers, both together and alone, for instance, will almost certainly matter in the life and death of our cities. But this is not even attempted in the scope of this project. Not because we do not see its importance, but because we are trying to simply understand something else. And, I think I speak for the whole group when I say, we would hope that this new and profound understanding of the dynamic of our whole city would inspire new and fervent prayers that would lead to new and innovative missionary sending.

Finally, some wise and sensitive readers urged caution in three ideas, the concern behind all three, I think, being very much the same. First, the similarities between some of our language and the spurious work of the dominionists. I do like the word domain, which I think is helpful and fitting, but do not like the often-associated notion of domination that can accompany it. We can understand these domains, and while also committing to walking as humble servants within them.

Second, the idea that as the church goes, so goes the city. If it were not true, and if it were not being said by one of the most feeble of all human institutions, we could be convinced not to say it at all. But it is the destiny of our weak and humble congregations to be the instrument of God's kingdom coming into the world. We can not change that, and we should not deny that. But if we carry that as some divine right to rule now, especially in those social spheres where we have rarely even shown up to help, we have missed the point. We are not arguing for triumphalism, or the seizing of social or political power, only saying that God has indeed "chosen the weak things of the world."

Third, there is some pause when we have said that the kingdom of God is a panacea, something that is my own word choice, and so I take responsibility for it. Again, I stand by the truth of it. Not as a lever for human endeavors, to say that we are somehow fit to fulfill or fix all things, but that the God who has saved us and is revealing himself to us, is. He who is the rightful ruler of all things, and the kingdom of his rule is also, in fact, the solution to every problem. While these problems may not be resolved in our lifetime, they are nevertheless subject to the finished work of the cross.

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Cities of Peace: A Proposal for a Holistic City Assessment Matrix

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In every generation, there is an impulse to either expand or contract the scope of responsibility attributed to the church. An era of big, triumphant visions of church impact and influence is (perhaps rightly) followed by one of smaller, localized commitment. Subsequently, the limitations of that smaller locus of concern are then (perhaps rightly) followed by a call to greater faith, engagement, and impact. It may well be that these two impulses do not represent a swinging pendulum but rather the tension of two very good and godly extensions of our very real moral and biblical responsibility. When we feel small, we should remember the eschatological destiny reserved for the people who follow the Lamb (in triumph). And when we feel big, we should remember the Christological imperative reflected in every disciple of the Lamb (who was slain). Our story as God's people started in a garden (Garden of Eden) with work, fellowship, and our collective future as the people of God is a new flourishing garden city (the New Jerusalem), and we are invited to play a part in the renewal of all things in partnership with God.

Cities are the fulcrum on which those two tensions are balanced. But in order to impact a city, we have to first be able to meaningfully understand it. To commit to a city, emotionally, spiritually, missiologically, and in a culturally tactical way, necessarily means engaging something small enough to feel a personal connection, yet big enough to be inspired by the prospect. Jesus talked about cities in the same way he talked about individuals, somehow exercising a collective will to receive or reject the visitation and declaration of the Kingdom of God.¹ We see a clear biblical precedent that cities, like the individual, are part of the mission of God given to the church, and are only becoming more important missiologically as the urban populations are projected to increase to 68.4% by 2050, up from 29.6% in 1950. By 2030, 41 megacities (up from 33 in 2018) are expected to host over 14% of the global urban population. The United States specifically has 280 million of its 350 million population who live in cities (80% of the total population).

Our thoughtful relationship to the city reflects some of our best thinking and practice. This too takes on new language in each new generation and with each new apostolic impulse. We have spoken about this unspoken yearning in various ways, but all groping for the words to describe what it would look like if the kingdom of God were to come near. The goal, in our view, is not to position the church (the people of God) as the hero in the story, but as servants and partners of our defining purpose: the establishment of the Kingdom. What we have at times called reaching, serving, loving, and transforming our city may well be an attempt to describe our heart for a church that breaks out of its silos and finds its place in the greater life of the city. We might say it this way: to see every person and every place, touched by every kind of good. We can all be forgiven for having a hard time defining what we have both not seen and what is meant to be a panacea for every human longing. The kingdom of God, when it comes, makes ALL things new. So, it is that to pray, declare, and labor for the kingdom to come is to invite a reality that is

¹ Luke 10:13-15, Matthew 23:37-39, Luke 13:34-35, Luke 19:41-44, and Matthew 10:14-15.

indescribable and redemptive of every city system. At the time of writing this paper, we recognize that the best word for this yearning (and promise) is human flourishing.

This project was initiated by a moment of conviction, repentance, and covenant between about two dozen organizational leaders (representing mostly missional agencies, many years of leadership experience, a wide-reaching influence, numerous training tools and processes; already leading, coaching, and influencing ministry in multiple cities and countries). We sensed God calling us to collaboration, not just in our existing work, but to seek out a select group of cities where we might combine our resources, expertise, funding, contacts, and personal commitment for the good of those places. If we worked together, there might be a greater chance that the Kingdom would come to those cities.

Naturally, that impulse needed refinement, theological reflection, and humble consideration. We do not see ourselves as anyone's savior, and know that our sincere offer must first respect the invitation, leadership, and spiritual authority of the leaders God has already positioned in those cities. In turn, this project has also been informed and refined by the tactical and missional genius of Luke 10. In this important text, partnership is a necessary condition. The visiting partner must find the person who already promotes peace (wholeness), and it is peace (wholeness) that is offered. In this way, they both become blessed as peacemakers. However, the offer initiated by the visitor is twofold: peacemaking and a shared pursuit of this mystery, as the kingdom draws near—nothing to sell, take, or exploit. The offer must be about the kingdom of God. The gesture itself stands to promote healing, revelation, and the displacement of powers at work for evil in the city. It is a partnership between the local and the translocal to see the kingdom come to the whole city.

THE PROBLEM

Still, what does that mean? What does it mean to serve, love, touch, reach, redeem, or lift a whole city? A whole implies parts, and to be able to identify those parts is surely a prerequisite to any citywide initiative. We have thought about disciplines like church planting or disciple making primarily in geographic terms. But cities are not primarily organized (only) by geography anymore. To understand what makes up the anatomy of a whole city requires an integration of networked realities, conflated against a myriad of overlapping identities that are self-described, demographic, and even unseen. Cities are composed of people, networks, and systems with both organic (social) and organized (structural) elements.

To engage with the whole of a city, we have to find a way of describing the components of the whole. If we use ecological language, what are the biotic and abiotic parts? What are the living and nonliving systems? We might also call these social and institutional systems.

We set out to answer that question, mining the existing literature, models, research, and city paradigms. While there are a myriad of competing models with various presuppositions, the volume of work on this problem was not overwhelming. In fact, while we would not call it a consensus, there are certainly noticeable repeated themes. This is encouraging and noteworthy. In other words, cities are not

inscrutable; they are simply being observed from various incongruent angles. The facets of a diamond appear different depending on the angle at which the diamond is regarded. So too our cities. The angle at which we consider them results in different but not contradictory perspectives. While we admit our bias, and the angle at which we are looking at cities is a Christian one, we also believe there are realities there that can be confirmed from every vantage point (whether Christian or not). And if we are right about our conclusions, they should be evident to a person with or without faith.

The first problem we had to solve was related to the Goldilocks principle. City taxonomies can be depicted as macro, meso, or micro networks.² Most of the work that Christian scholars and practitioners have done seems to offer conceptual macro frameworks. These are perhaps too broad and include too many realities. On the other hand, most missional engagement is done on the micro level, which is certainly too granular and virtually impossible to even identify, never mind track. In our opinion, a meso-level analysis is needed, and yet not readily available. We had to discern the right number of categories, systems, or domains where contextual engagement would be warranted, but not too many that the prospect is untenable. Further, we had to group those categories by the two missional objects being addressed: the *individual person* and the *individual city*. In that sense, what we are offering is a contribution to the field of sociometry.³ The list of domains we then segmented into the flourishing person and the flourishing city can also be evaluated through the lens of what has been called the ecology of games, acknowledging that each individual or entity will have agendas, causes, and dynamics for personal gain and preference. Loosely, networks within a city can be grouped together based on shared objectives. These are often overlapping but can be grouped by macro objectives (i.e., in business, there is a shared objective of profit, productivity, and sustainability; that is the game being played by businesses).

THE FLOURISHING PERSON (Y-AXIS)

We started by thinking about the systems that contribute to the flourishing person, which were readily available from the Global Flourishing Study⁴, the most rigorous sociological research of its kind, conducted by Harvard, Baylor, and Gallup, identifies these four as the highest-leverage pathways for human flourishing. We use them here not merely as academic categories, but as theological ones. Each of the four pathways maps naturally onto a theology of place: family is anchored in the home (first place); work and education are centered in the workplace and school (second place); religious community gathers in the third place; and together, all four point to the city itself as the overarching context — the place Scripture returns to again and again from Isaiah 65 to Jeremiah 29 to the whole of Acts to Revelation 21. The city is where the drama of human flourishing plays out.

² See Zachsry Neal, For one way of understanding what he calls the Nested Levels of Urban Networks. Here, we are simply using these terms to describe big picture (macro) dynamics in a city, which are often too broad to be missionally actionable, street level engagements (micro) which are unconnected to the larger city realities, and mezo level analysis and engagement which is where we are trying to connect the two.

³ A method of measuring social relationships, developed by psychologist and sociologists that takes into account both personal and social dimensions.

⁴ <https://globalflourishingstudy.com/>

The four empirically verified categories of family, education, work, and religious community represent non-negotiable categories for considering human flourishing.⁵ And our cities are made up of (and made for) people. Further, the good news of the kingdom is first good news to the human person. So, we needed to consider any city systems by their relationship to the good of the people who inhabit them. This is why we have plotted those four concerns along the Y-axis of our grid.

Family

Family is a foundational social system that organizes care, belonging, and intergenerational formation through enduring relationships. Family is not just a private good—it is a foundational context where meaning, identity, and well-being are formed.

Work

Work is a social system that structures economic participation, shared purpose, and contribution through organized roles and labor. Flourishing depends not only on having work, but on experiencing work as worthwhile and contributive.

Religious Community

Religious community is a social system that transmits shared meaning, moral norms, and mutual support through communal practices and institutions. Religious community functions as a powerful social and meaning-making institution, not merely a belief system.

Education

Education is a social system that develops knowledge, skills, and social capacity through formal and informal learning institutions. Education contributes to flourishing not only through achievement but through shaping understanding, agency, and long-term life trajectories.

THE FLOURISHING CITY (X-Axis)

We then moved to thinking about the flourishing city. We took a variety of existing models available to us to construct a comprehensive list of systems and the various ways they are categorized. Again, there was remarkable agreement on these systems (while there were certainly different semantic choices being made). We consolidated that list into 15 systems, using language that would work across various disciplines and which was common to our own experience in religious, civic, AND marketplace

⁵ See Appendix A for the Harvard Study's depiction of the relationship between the pathways and domains of human flourishing.

leadership. We then segmented that list into what we have called social, institutional, and hybrid systems.

Institutional Systems (6)

Government

Government systems coordinate collective decision-making, public services, and the administration of shared resources to support order, safety, and the common good.

Judicial / Justice Systems

Judicial and justice systems uphold the rule of law by resolving disputes, enforcing rights, and maintaining fairness, accountability, ethics, and public trust.

Higher Education

Higher education systems develop advanced knowledge, professional expertise, and civic leadership that shape innovation, workforce capacity, and cultural influence.

Basic Infrastructure

Infrastructure systems provide the physical foundations—transportation, water, energy, and communications—that enable daily life and economic activity to function.

Health & Mental Health Care Systems

Health and mental health systems promote physical and psychological well-being through prevention, treatment, and care across the lifespan.

Housing Systems

Housing systems shape stability and opportunity by determining access to safe, affordable, and community-integrated places to live.

Social Systems (6)

Sports & Leisure

Sports and leisure systems foster physical health, social connection, identity, and shared enjoyment through recreation and competition.

Arts & Entertainment

Arts and entertainment systems shape cultural expression, storytelling, and creativity, contributing to identity, imagination, and social cohesion.

Economic Systems

Economic systems organize the production, exchange, and distribution of resources, influencing opportunity, inequality, and material well-being.

Innovation & Future-Making Systems

Innovation and future-making systems drive adaptation and progress by developing new ideas, technologies, and models that shape long-term possibilities.

Philanthropy & Generosity

Philanthropy systems mobilize private generosity to support public goods, experimentation, and long-term investments in community well-being.

Political Systems

Political systems enable representation, public debate, and power-sharing by organizing how collective priorities are contested and decided in both formal and informal ways (association groups). These are differentiated from government in that they rely on elected officials and not simply public service.

Hybrid System⁶ (can be both institution and/or social) (3)

Nonprofit

Nonprofit systems address social needs, serve vulnerable populations, volunteer time and effort around causes, and strengthen civic life through mission-driven service and advocacy.

Churches and Faith Institutions

Churches and faith institutions cultivate meaning, moral formation, social support, and community cohesion through shared beliefs and practices.

Business & Entrepreneurship Systems

Business and entrepreneurship systems generate employment and economic value through enterprise, risk-taking, and market activity.

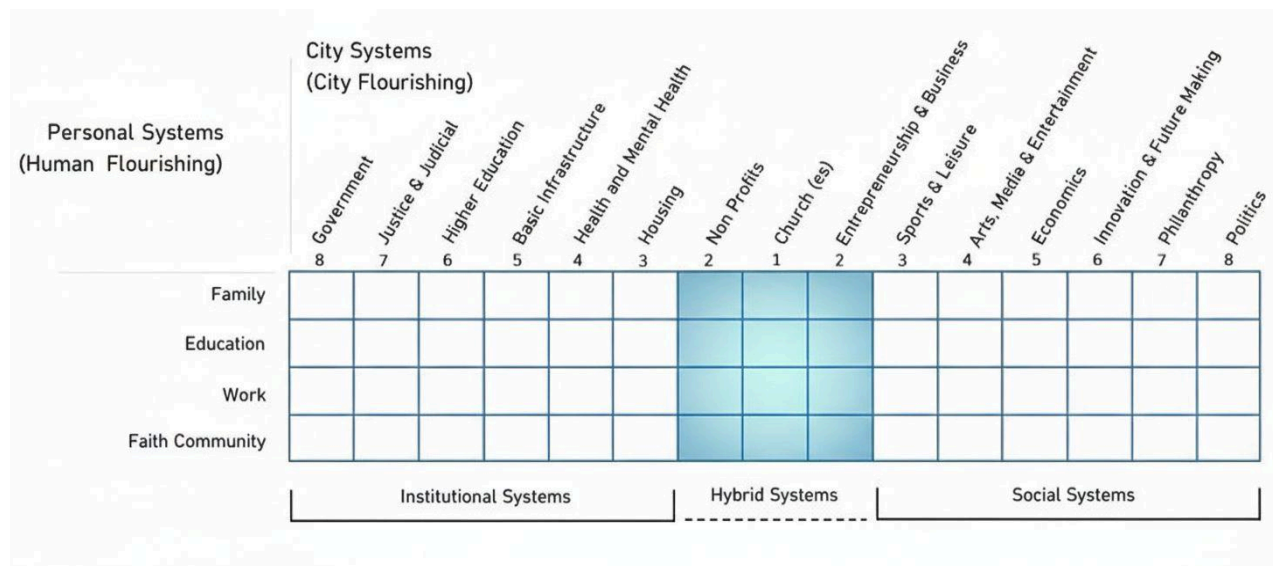
It is our contention that city flourishing is not fully possible without health, creative engagement, and goodness in each of these systems.

By plotting the intersection of each of the four elements of human flourishing against these systems necessary for city flourishing, we can discern 60 domains that can be assessed, appreciated, and creatively engaged. This grid then offers what we hope will be a comprehensive map for assessing any number of questions about the reality of our cities.

⁶ We acknowledge the limitations of the term “hybrid” here. What we mean to say is that these middle systems are neither and both (institutional and social systems). These middle groups may well represent the “who” instead of the what. It is the people who comprise our churches, businesses, and non profits which are most likely to be able to leverage this model for engagement and change.

THE ASSESSMENT GRID

We then mapped these systems based on what we called perceived impact on the person and domain. The order of the systems across the y-axis, then, is meaningful because we start with the idea that church, business, and non-profit organizations represent the centralizing lived experience of these 15 systems. That is not to say the others are less important; on the contrary, the ones that are farther from the center (radiating from our perceived importance) may well be more important because they have an imperceptible impact on our collective wellbeing.

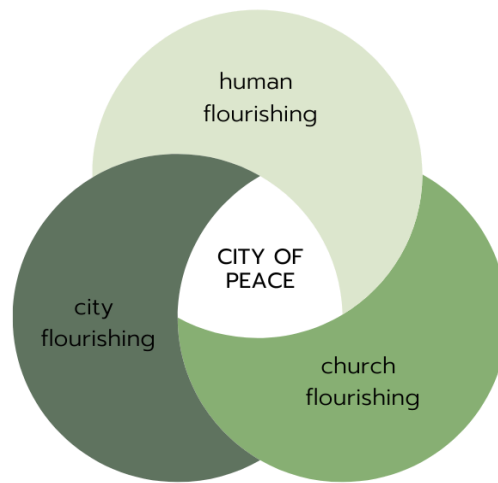


Systems labeled at 8 (government and politics), for instance, are perhaps the furthest from our direct awareness. Unhealth in those systems will quietly and imperceptibly harm a city's inhabitants. Conversely, our inability to afford housing in our city is much closer to a perceptible system impact, which is why it would be labeled at 3.

CENTERING THE CHURCH

We contend that the Church (the people of God) should be the center of this assessment and city analysis because, as the church goes, so go the rest of the city (and its tributaries). This is not because Christians are somehow better than other city residents or because the church is somehow a more sophisticated social organization, but because God has chosen the church to be the vehicle for his grace. While we may not always live up to this purpose, we are uniquely tasked with bringing the whole gospel to the whole person and the whole city. Perhaps it is precisely because we are unsophisticated, and because we are made up of ordinary people, that he has chosen the church for this task. Again, this does not mean the church is the only agent for change or grace in the city, but that we are tasked with that

cause as being our only cause. It is our telos (reason for existing). In this way, the well-being (flourishing) of our city and its people is inextricably bound with the flourishing of the church itself.



THE ASSESSMENT

By conducting an initial assessment of city health, we will be able to see a depiction of a city's strengths (places of health), weaknesses (places of brokenness), and conditions in between. The assessment will be based on four initial data sources (for each of the 60 domains). 1) relevant public data, 2) surveys responding to resident perception and lived experience, 3) expert and insider feedback, 4) AI-powered content analysis.

The assessment can also be tailored to answer other pressing questions. Initially, we will engineer the assessment to assess the following five concerns:

1. Overall health (of that domain)
2. Christian presence (in that domain)
3. Mission/gospel engagement (in that domain)
4. Justice/righteousness (or lack of in that domain)
5. Cross-organizational Collaboration (in that domain)

The assessment will give us a road map for ongoing engagement (if it is warranted and welcomed).

THEORY OF CHANGE

All of this to what end? It is our belief that in order to touch, serve, or even pray for every aspect of a city, you have to be able to meaningfully identify what comprises a city. But knowing that (and even assessing the health of those meaningful parts) is not the goal. The hope would be that by being able to

see the city clearly, we could then determine the unreached places where God might be sending us, and the potential that is as yet unrealised. Maps help us see where we still have yet to go. But again, missional engagement is not the final goal. While it would be both powerful and beautiful to see God's people engaging every corner and network in a city, it would not be enough to ultimately transform the city.

Just as God's people are destined to be transformed into the image of Christ Jesus, so too cities are destined to be transformed into the image of the Kingdom of God. This vision is therefore not just seeing mission happen in every sector and sphere, but seeing unity between them. The end goal would be to network together the missionary champions in all of these spaces to be working together in theologically grounded relationships, for the good of the city and its people.⁷ The vision Jesus has for his people, expressed so powerfully in John 17 for an applied trinitarian oneness, should also be the goal of every church, ministry, and band of missionaries working in every facet of city life. We believe that when we pray and labor for the kingdom to come in each of these spaces, in unity with each other, cities will be transformed.

If you can see the kingdom come in every domain of city life, if there is faithful engagement in all 60 domains, and there is goodwill, collaboration, and shared concern between those champions, you would see every kind of good, in every place, for every person in the city.

Practically, that means a decrease in every kind of vice and an increase in every kind of virtue. It is not one single outcome we would be forecasting, but a wholesale amelioration of the city, and the experience of life within it. It would be the fulfillment of the Lord's prayer, "May your Kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven." It would be impossible (and inadequate) to try to reduce the result of this kind of comprehensive change to one kind of good, or to see this endeavor undertaken by one singular organization or church. The Kingdom of God is a panacea. Whatever you now see as broken and wish were different would be. Because the Kingdom of God proposes to be the solution to every problem and the fulfillment of every good. We believe that when faithful Christian presence exists in every domain of city life, and those leaders collaborate in unity, the result is a measurable flourishing of the city.

THE COLLABORATIVE TEAM OF ORGS

This project was started in response to a call we all heard from God to work together, not just in scattered mission, but in a commitment to specific cities. The national and international organizations represented in our collaboration set out to find a way to serve cities poised for this kind of broad-scale renewal, mission engagement, and unifying work. While we do recognize the collective strength of our group, we also know that we are specialists in certain areas and not others (micro/church, disciple-making movements, city-networks, network theory, theological education). This led us to

⁷ We acknowledge the assumption here that we are talking about working in city with a significant Christian presence, that represents a critical mass for engagement at all these levels.

consider whether forming a super collaboration before partnering with cities would be the right approach. In that case, we would want to assemble at least one organization with expertise in each of the 15 City domains (if not all 60). In the end, we chose against this approach because we believe each city will have a unique fingerprint of assets and liabilities, reflecting its own organizational traction and shortfalls. In other words, there will be plenty of domains where a city is already strong enough and has mature Christian leadership that it will not need any outside help (or outside help would be counterproductive). Further, the strength of one city, in one domain (once identified) could well be a gift and service to other cities weak in that same area.

Also, the gaps revealed by the assessment will be unique to each city. But all cities can start with the blue zone depicted in the matrix. And so the organizations we represent will serve those domains first (whether healthy or not) to imagine activating and empowering work in the rest of the city. We will work with those in the city to "*start with the end in mind*", and help the Christian presence "*dream of a flourishing city*" in 3,5,10,20 years time. This unlocks a sense of imagination, aspiration, hope, and possibility- that unites the effort and pulls the leaders forward towards it. One of the ways to start this journey is to help the church identify, equip, and activate Christian presence in each domain, and even help to start new, contextualized work in each area because of our entrepreneurial expertise, particularly when working with the church and non-profit sector.



Either in

summary at the bottom or incorporated in the beginning, I think we need to name what we are actually

doing/proposing more clearly. In my view we are proposing “a City Systems Theology or Framework” – a missional operating system for cities that integrates Harvard Flourishing research, missional theology, city network theory, systems thinking and collaborative impact.