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Mission in the “Age of Migration”

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Abstract: The United Nations reports there are 272 million migrants in the world today. In spite of the situations of crises that often give rise to such a phenomenon, the impact can be positive in terms of the development of both individuals and society. Contemporary missiological literature has recognized the increasing significance of the impact of migration on the spread of Christianity as well. Since the time of the Early Church, people on the move, sometimes due to persecution, have played significant roles as the church spread throughout the Roman World and beyond. There is a need and opportunity for missiological researchers to explore the relationship between migration and mission from the historical, empirical, and theological perspectives.

“Migration” in many ways defines the twenty-first century. While migration has been a phenomena throughout the history of mankind, recent developments on the political, social, and economic fronts—combined with modern transportation possibilities and communication technologies—have accelerated the impact of global people movements on large parts of the world.¹ The United Nations reports that the number of migrants now is growing at a rate faster than that of the world’s population. Currently there are 272 million people on the move worldwide, with the United States host to 51 million foreign-born individuals, more than any other country,² although, as a percentage of total population, several other countries have a larger proportion of foreign-born residents than the United States, such as Canada at 22% and Australia at 28%.³ The tiny country of Lebanon has received over 1.5 million refugees, which amounts to over 30% of its population.



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The Impact of the Age of Migration for the World and the Church

While migration is often motivated by crises, the United Nations states that the positive impact of migration for the economic and social development of both the host country and the country of origin “is very well established.” This is true because of the transfer of remittances, but also the exchange of ideas, which make social contributions.⁴ Migration is becoming an increasingly significant field of research from the secular perspective; however, as Kari Storstein Haug has pointed out, the relationship between migration and religion only recently has become more widely recognized.⁵

Yet, when assessing historically the impact of migration on the expansion of the Gospel for two millennia, it is evident that since the time of the Early Church, global migration patterns have had significant implications for how and where the church became established and matured into a transforming influence, both for individuals and whole societies.

Latin American theologian, Samuel Escobar, in an article titled, “Mission Fields on the Move,” describes how since the beginning of the Christian movement migration has been an important factor in how God carries out his mission.⁶ The apostle Paul, he notes, concludes his Epistle to the Romans with greetings to a long list of people from all around the empire who ended up migrating to Rome because of various circumstances. Like the United States today, Rome was a center of economic growth, political power, and cultural influence. It is only natural that people would be attracted to the opportunities that life in Rome presented.

The first people to whom Paul extends greetings in Romans 16 are Priscilla and Aquila. They had been refugees, having earlier been expelled from Rome because of their Jewish ethnicity (Acts 18:2–3). They met Paul in Corinth, where they became instrumental in helping the apostle. Eventually, they would instruct Apollos, who is widely considered to have been the author of the Letter to the Hebrews (Acts 18:26). Apparently, they made their way back to Rome, where tradition says they were martyred, probably about the same time as Paul himself. In fact, it was often the case that the Christian Church grew in the early years as people boldly gave witness to the Gospel even as they were forced to be on the move because of persecution. As a result of the great persecution of the church in Jerusalem in connection with the martyrdom of Stephen, much of the church fled, and, as they went about, “they were bringing the good news of the word wherever they went” (Acts 8:4).

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In the contemporary world, trends in global migration far outpace what the world has ever seen in the past. Emory University historian, Jehu Hanciles, himself an immigrant from Sierra Leone, West Africa, has written a monumental study in which he demonstrates that, while mission in the past was often viewed as being from the West to the rest, mission today is from everywhere to everywhere, with missionaries traveling in all directions.⁷

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In England, considered to be the most irreligious nation in the West, the population of immigrants is the ray of hope for Christianity in that country. Cardinal Vincent Nichols stated, “Immigration is helping to bring Britain back to its Christian roots and reviving religion in a ‘weary, western’ culture.”⁸

In Berlin, Germany, Evangelical Lutheran Trinity Church and Community has been transformed by the influx of Iranian immigrants, who have been instructed and have embraced the Lutheran faith. Pastor Gottfried Martins baptized an Iranian for the first time in 2011, and the church has since grown from just a handful of German members to some 1,500—most of whom are from Iran and Afghanistan!⁹

Examples of how the new reality has played itself out in the Lutheran Church in the United States can be found on the website www.MissionNationPublishing.com. It is dedicated to giving a voice to immigrants who have become missionaries to America. It includes biographies and videos of the amazing stories of those who, because of migration, have been able to bring the love of Christ to people here in America, as well as back to their homeland.

Need and Opportunity for Missiological Research

Clearly, migration and mission is a topic worthy of further exploration for missiological studies. When this writer began to study missiology over thirty-five years ago, the assumption was that a Westerner would go to a pristine, isolated, and insulated community in another part of the world, where he would spend decades learning the language, culture, and worldview of the local inhabitants, and gently, albeit intentionally, begin to introduce the Christian message in ways that preserved the local culture yet resulted in its transformation through the Gospel.

So much has changed since then—and was probably already changing in significant ways at that time, but we did not always immediately recognize it. Globalization and the impact of migration, rapid transportation, and instantaneous and inexpensive communication technologies have meant that many of the old missionary assumptions and methods have gone by the wayside. Now mission goes in all

directions, with “majority world missions” becoming more and more the primary mode of Christian expansion.¹⁰

Migration has meant that the world’s cultures, worldviews, and religious belief systems are bumping into each other with increasing frequency. Often this can be a cause for tension and even conflict, but it can also be an opportunity for learning, appreciation, and understanding. It means new questions need to be addressed. Nineteenth-century theologian Martin Kähler made the claim that “mission is the mother of theology.”¹¹ This is because new contexts require Christian theologians to address issues they hadn’t thought about before. The context for mission today is the context of migration, and this new context is much more complex and dynamic than the functionalist and structuralist anthropological approaches of early missiology can account for. But it is a context nonetheless, and the field of migration and mission is a fertile and promising area of study. The various approaches and issues are nicely documented by Haug in her article, “Migration in Missiological Research.”¹²

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Concluding Thoughts

Migration has become a sometimes-volatile political issue. While it is legitimate that nations enact just laws to ensure the security and safety of their inhabitants, Christians also remember they are a part of God’s kingdom, which places higher expectations upon them. Here is where the points made by Samuel Escobar provide food for thought for us today.

First, he calls for Christian compassion and sensitivity. Lutherans have done this when they have founded organizations such as Christian Friends of New Americans in St. Louis, Missouri. This organization seeks to demonstrate Christian love and compassion by offering a range of programs to help immigrants and refugees (www.cfna-stl.org).

Second, he recommends that churches should take a prophetic stance against the injustices and abuse that migrants often suffer. Guidance can be found in a study by the LCMS’s Commission on Theology and Church Relations, titled *Immigrants Among Us: A Lutheran Framework for Addressing Immigration Issues*. It can be obtained online at www.lcms.org/ctcr.

Thirdly, Escobar suggests that the church see the global migrant movements today as opportunities for outreach. This has been certainly the case throughout the history of Christianity and will continue to be a major factor today and into the future. Experience has shown that often as people migrate to new locations, where they cross not only geographic borders, but also linguistic and cultural barriers, their minds and hearts are opened to new ideas, new thought-patterns, and new outlooks on life. Often the old social pressures that were present in one's home country are absent; and, as people become free of these pressures, they become ready to hear and explore new notions and concepts.

That includes a hearing for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is the power of God to give people new hope and a future.

Moreover, there are almost one million international students in America, who come here to learn not only mathematics, medicine, or marketing, but also to experience American life and culture. Yet 80% of those students never see the inside of an American home during their stay. Groups such as International Student Ministry St. Louis (www.ismstl.org) and others around the country can help to bridge that gap, as well as provide a positive witness to the Gospel.

Migration is clearly having an impact on world Christianity, causing growth in directions that can only be accounted for by God's divine providence. It is *His* mission. This is a timely—even urgent—issue that merits further research, reflection, and dialogue.

Endnotes

¹ Kari Storstein Haug, "Migration in Missiological Research," *International Review of Missions*, 107 (June 2018): 279–293.

² *UN News*. United Nations, September 17, 2019, accessed September 19, 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/09/1046562>.

³ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/12/15/international-migration-key-findings-from-the-u-s-europe-and-the-world/> (accessed September 30, 2017).

⁴ *UN News*, United Nations, September 17, 2019.

⁵ Haug, "Migration." Haug points out that the seminal work on the topic of contemporary migration, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, by Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), did not include a section on the relationship or connectedness of religion to migration issues, which eventually caused the American Academy of Religion to invite scholars to present studies and papers reflecting on the topic of the "role and impact of religion on migration" (p. 280).

⁶ Samuel Escobar, "Mission Fields on the Move," in *Christianity Today* 54, no. 5 (May 2010): 28–31.

⁷ Jehu J. Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (New York: Maryknoll, 2008).

⁸ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/11724826/Immigration-reviving-Christianity-in-Britain-Cardinal.html> (accessed September 30, 2017).

⁹ Amy Bracken, “This Evangelical Church in Berlin is Helping Iranians Looking for Asylum,” *PRI’s The World*, Public Radio International, February 22, 2017, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-02-22/evangelical-church-berlin-helping-iranians-looking-asylum> (accessed September 27, 2019).

¹⁰ See Enoch Wan and Michael Pocock, eds., *Missions from the Majority World: Progress, Challenges and Case Studies* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2009).

¹¹ As quoted by Ott: “The earliest mission became the mother of theology, because it attacked the contemporary culture.” See Craig Ott and Stephen J. Strauss, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), xviii.

¹² Haug, “Migration.” Haug details approaches that can be used for the study of migration from a missiological perspective, such as historical, descriptive and analytical (empirical), or theological. The descriptive/analytical approach can look at how migration affects the faith and identity of the migrant; or, on the other hand, it can look at those who have not moved, but “whose landscape has changed due to migration.” In other words, how has the phenomenon of migration challenged the faith and practice of those who have received migrants into their midst? She, following Stephen Bevans, talks about three broad categories for research: First, mission among immigrants; second, mission *of* migrants; and third, migration and mission theology. She concludes, “For missiological research, this is a challenge and opportunity for further exploration of the role and significance of faith and community in the contemporary fluidity of the intercultural, inter-religious, and transnational context, as well as rethinking some of its basis (*sic*) theories related to contextualization and religious encounter, meanwhile reflecting on how theology and missiology should look in the years to come” (293).