Bridge People and LCMS Congregations: Bicultural Immigrants, Missions, and the Scriptures

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Abstract

Migration allows people the opportunity to operate in different cultures with various levels of fluency. People fluent in two or more cultures can increase the reach of mission work through congregations involved with immigrant groups. Tensions arise, however, as these people may feel torn between cultures. By understanding some of the terms around immigration and culture, we can understand the role of people to bridge various cultures in service to congregations by reaching out with the Gospel. Their bridging is not simply between groups but also brings people together under the authority of the Scriptures, which owe their origin to divine inspiration.

Bridging Different Cultures

Once, when speaking with a congregation leader about issues immigrant families face while raising children, he remarked that the congregation's community center had produced a video. He pointed out two children in the video, both born to immigrant parents. The children introduced themselves: "I'm from the Congo," said one. "I'm from Australia," said the other. As we watched, the congregation leader remarked, "They're the same age." Each statement was true for each child. Bicultural fluency for immigrant generations looms large in the minds of diaspora communities. Retaining old and absorbing new cultures are adaptations that immigrant families and communities cannot avoid. Just how much to retain and how much to absorb are perennial questions, complicated by the different levels of

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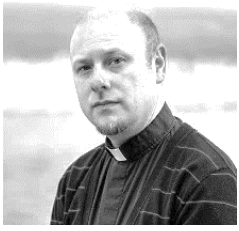

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adaptation among parents, children, and grandchildren in these communities. As individuals operate in multiple cultural settings, they act as bridges between the different cultures—as Bridge People. They address themselves to people of many different cultural contexts by virtue of their capability in multiple cultures.

As the illustration indicates, some tensions go along with being a bridge between cultures: the danger of feeling torn between those two cultures.[1] One's culture is, after all, a source of immense importance; people cherish their cultures. Thus, speaking about the meeting of cultures in the Church requires our care and awareness. However, there are implications for mission work in immigrant communities we would do well to consider. To do that requires discussing the processes of cultural engagement across immigrant generations. Doing so allows us to consider the category of Bridge People as a missions category. Second, we turn to the foundation and function of the Scriptures and the opportunities that accompany the tensions in the life of congregations and their outreach. Then, we turn to the role Bridge People have in demonstrating and encouraging unity in Lutheran multiethnic congregations.

Though our goal here is to discuss engaging immigrant mission fields with the Gospel of Christ, there are a host of terms often used to discuss immigration and its accompanying cultural adaptations which are important to note. For our purposes, it is enough to consider the terms *assimilation*, *integration*, and *acculturation*. They are applied to the different experiences of immigrant generations: the first generation (born abroad), 1.5 generation (born abroad but partly raised and educated in the host culture), second generation (born in the host country), and third generation (the grandchildren of the first generation). Sociologists commonly use the term *assimilation* to describe immigrant groups becoming like the majority native-born population. Richard Alba and Victor Nee, in their book *Rethinking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration*, take up the question of old and new views on assimilation. They propose that assimilation theories old and new hold in common the minimizing of "ethnic change," whether it is pressure on immigrants to abandon their cultures and embrace the American mainstream or a mutual cultural adaptation of immigrant groups and the mainstream culture where both decide what aspects to retain and adopt.[2] *Integration* is a related term, often referring to the processes involved when immigrants participate in the host country's institutions.[3] *Acculturation* is the acquiring of a new culture and can apply to infants acquiring the culture of their parents as much as to adults acquiring a new culture because of immigration.[4]

All of these terms are contested to one degree or another. The nuance concerning assimilation is the speed at which different generations acquire a new culture. An obvious example is the higher rate of new language acquisition that children possess compared to adults. Anthropologist Margaret A. Gibson introduced the term *segmented assimilation* to encompass three different outcomes for different immigrant groups: (1) a steady economic and cultural assimilation, (2) a more selective process, and (3) a process that stagnates groups economically.[5] Also complicating the term is the rate of assimilation between groups or between diaspora communities in different locations, depending on their circumstances. Factors such as the amount of contact between immigrant groups and the

rest of the community, as well as the size and migration replenishment rates of groups, are examples here that affect the speed of acculturation.[6] In the realm of missiology, Wan and Casey take a term like *assimilation* and reframe it as the opportunity for different cultural groups to become a bit more like each other, redefining the process as a reciprocal social interaction.[7] When that happens, the opportunities for the spread of the Gospel in multiple cultural directions increase significantly. When different immigrant and non-immigrant groups grow together, even slightly, their reach expands accordingly.

The Diaspora Experience and the Mission Field

Based on the experience of immigrants in the United States, one can argue that it is not simply the new cultural surroundings where diaspora communities find themselves that determine how cultural adaptation takes place. Current immigration processes allow for increased transnationalism. Increased transnationalism need not imply a flat refusal to adapt to a host culture but rather a different rate of acculturation. As we have seen, scholars posit that assimilation is not always a straight line, and connections between the home country and the host country affect this process also. Fernández-Kelly proposes viewing transnationalism in its cultural aspects along horizontal and vertical axes. The horizontal vector deals with connections between immigrants' homeland and their new country, a process that maintains ties between the two places but also includes how diaspora communities provide mutual assistance to operate more easily in their new cultural setting. The vertical vector deals with how the second and third generations can interact with the birth countries of their parents. Even when viewed as opportunities for business networks, these interactions function as ties both to their parents' generation and to the wider culture of their land of origin.[8] As she writes, "by affirming bonds to the homeland, younger generations honor their progenitors and redefine their own position in places of birth *and* residence."[9]

In terms of Christian missions application, while the spread of the Gospel from one location to another and from generation to generation is nothing new, how remarkable and extensive these channels of interaction are demands attention. The Gospel moves along these channels. At this point, we also note with Jehu Hanciles that the usual conception of globalism can limit how we view its missiological implications because "the realities shaping non-white immigration into Western societies render existing theories of assimilation unsustainable, even misleading."[10] He develops this point that, when it comes to globalization, there exists a one-directional mindset of the West as the only culture that influences anyone, but "such views overlook the capacity of non-Western societies to adapt or resist Western flows and project alternative movements with potential global impact."[11] Immigrants from the Global South contribute to the engagement of all mission fields in the United States, immigrant and non-immigrant. These issues are not as simple as either completely resisting the host culture or completely assimilating to it. That fact alone requires research on the contributions globalization can make to mission work among immigrant communities.

I think it is helpful to discuss the term *Bridge People* in bicultural and multicultural missions settings. As a missions term, the idea came together for me while reading Paul

Hiebert's *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* and his use of the terms *Bicultural Brokers* and *Bridging Relationships*.[12] As an immigration term, *Bridge People* implies no more than an immigrant of the first to third generation who builds bridges between two groups: those of the inherited and newly acquired cultures. As a missions term, it means bicultural Christians who connect multiethnic congregation members of both cultures to each other and to the Scriptures. The key is the capacity for Bridge People to connect different cultural groups not only to each other through their unique levels of cultural fluency but to tie different groups together to the Scriptures. Which word will be the authoritative word for a congregation? (see Figure 1). Having the Scriptures as the authority is important since the Holy Spirit uses God's Word to tie us to Christ. When Bridge People encourage others to study the Word together and live under the authority of the Scriptures as the common authority in the Church, their faithful example can ease many potential tensions in multiethnic congregational outreach, as we will explore in the final section. Such example is for the sake of faith in Christ.

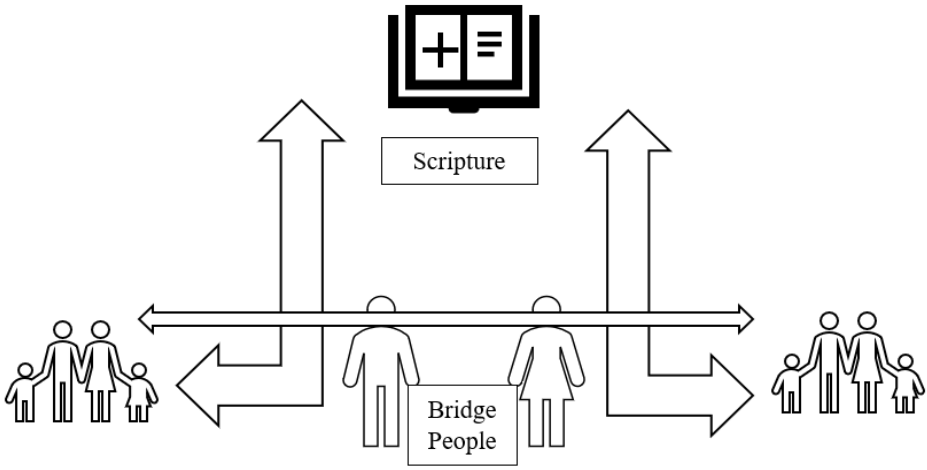

Figure 1. Bridge People connect congregants of different cultural groups to each other and to Scripture.

Bridging People: A Biblical Perspective

Now we turn to Bridge People examples from the New Testament and how this concept makes use of the article of the inspiration of Scripture. Consider Barnabas, a Jewish Christian from the Gentile island of Cyprus (Acts 4:36). Sent by the apostles to inspect the Gentile mission field in Antioch, he (true to his name) encourages Jewish and Gentile Christians, tying them together. However, not only does he tie them together, but he also travels to Tarsus to recruit another preacher and teacher to tie together Jews and Gentiles under the Scriptures: Paul (Acts 11:25–26). Timothy is another very well-known example, having a Jewish mother and a Greek father (Acts 16:1). Paul has Timothy circumcised, since his mixed parentage was well-known, that he would more easily work

in the Jewish mission field (Acts 16:3). But Paul also sends him to Corinth (1 Cor 4:17), Thessalonica (1 Thess 3:2), and Ephesus (1 Tim 1:3), churches that engaged both the Jewish and Gentile mission fields. However, the clearest example of tying together Jews and Gentiles under the Scriptures surprisingly comes from James in Acts 15. There, he settles the question of Gentile incorporation alongside Jewish Christians and apart from circumcision or any other works of the Law into the Church by quoting Amos 9. He ties them together under the authority of the Scripture by quoting an Old Testament prophet and giving the apostolic prohibitions that clearly mark uncircumcised Gentile believers as belonging to the one communion of the Church together with Jewish Christians (Acts 15).[13]

The reason Bridge People can tie together different cultural groups underneath the authority of the Scriptures is because Scripture is the inspired Word of God. Here, the emphasis is on what the article of inspiration has to say about the source and origin of the Scriptures. The Scriptures do not belong to any one culture but are of divine origin. Terms like *assimilation* deal with the acquisition of culture, but the Scriptures are not a product of culture. Culture is the cumulation of judgments made by people.[14] However, the Scriptures address all cultures from outside because of the article of inspiration. The question then is how this can be, since the books of Scripture come through the pens of human writers. These writers cannot be separated from their cultures. The old Lutheran theologians uphold the role of the authors while maintaining the authority that the Scriptures have over all cultures. The Holy Spirit both inspires the Scriptures and uses them as the means to create and sustain faith in hearers from all cultures. Theologians, therefore, make the distinction between the efficient cause and instrumental cause of Scripture. God is the efficient cause (*causa efficiens scripturae principalis*).[15] The human writers of Scripture are the instruments that God used to deliver the Scriptures, the instrumental cause (*causae instrumentales*).[16] As Gerhard writes, "They neither spoke nor wrote by human or their own will; rather, they were moved, driven, led, impelled by the Holy Spirit and controlled by him. They did not write as men but as 'holy men of God,' that is, they wrote as God's servants and as the unique instruments of the Holy Spirit."[17] Heinrich Schmidt quotes Calov on the ability of the Holy Spirit to inspire the Word of God in many languages: "'The Holy Spirit, supreme author of the Holy Scriptures, was not bound to the style of any one, but, as a perfectly free teacher of languages, could use, through any person soever, the character, style, and mode of speech that He chose.'"[18] As the instrumental cause of Scripture, Gerhard draws attention to the apostles' universal office. The implication is that the Scriptures neither originate from any people nor belong to any one people or any one time. He writes, "The apostles are commanded to teach all nations [Matt 28:20]; they also are ordered to put their instruction in writing, for they could not teach all nations to come in the future without writing."[19]

In line with Gerhard's quote, we cannot assert any opposition between the words of Scripture and the message of Scripture. This protects the teaching that the Scriptures are accessible to all cultures since it allows for faithful translation into all languages. Therefore, people who act as bridges between languages can also act as bridges between cultures. What matters in the end is what ties together the people on each side of the bridge, as it were. While there are common points among all cultures because of a common humanity

as part of God's creation, these First Article connections cannot alone bear the weight of the many cultural differences. But when Bridge People connect people to the divine authority of the Scriptures as one that objectively applies to all cultures, the results are many. As the Scriptures transcend cultural barriers between people, the results are faith in God, who inspired the Scriptures, and the opportunity to grow together under the Scriptures with those of the same communion in the Divine Service. As one of my dissertation respondents put it, "Here is my Swahili Bible. You find the Romans, I'll find Romans, and you read the English or in my Swahili, we get along very fine." Growing together under the Scriptures can happen as easily as when Bridge People add to the conversation at Bible study by bringing together insights from multiple cultures that show delight in the Scriptures, which are gifted to all cultures equally (and addressed to all cultures equally). In leading different cultures to study the Scriptures together, Bridge People function to help each group teach the content of the Scriptures to each other by teaching the text of the Scriptures with all the insights that different cultures afford in their interpretations. Doing so does not require favoring any particular culture since the Scriptures exist in translation so that all studying it may be studying the same Scriptures in different languages.

The above is but one example where Bridge People can ease any potential tensions between different cultural groups in the life of a congregation. This contribution to congregational life includes the work of outreach to different immigrant mission fields as well as to the native-born. Bridge People can make a unique contribution because of their ability to operate more easily in two different cultures and to bring the teaching of the Scriptures to those interactions. In a multiethnic congregation, the role of these connectors is especially significant to facilitate communication within the communion of the congregation.

Within the communion of the congregation, Bridge People can help as one culture judges another. We can consider culture as a shared set of judgments on myriad individual events passed on from one generation to the next. Therefore, within the congregation, Bridge People can make a unique contribution in judging different cultural patterns from an almost liminal perspective. As noted in the introduction, differing cultural patterns can create much push and pull from people who mainly operate within one cultural context. And yet, it bears repeating that social cohesion can be the only goal of multiethnic communities apart from scriptural authority. But, under the Scriptures, the goal is growing together in faith as an exchange in teaching the Scriptures and communal formation by the Scriptures.

Because Bridge People can occupy such a tense role in the congregation, the whole congregation can support them. If the immigrant community complains that Bridge People act too much like the native-born community, and if the native-born community complains that they act too much like the immigrant community, Bridge People can feel abandoned by both cultures. If Bridge People can serve in a useful role in a congregation, congregations can act to cultivate those roles. The main encouragement here comes through parents, through households. When a child of an immigrant family sees mother and father actively involved in the life of the congregation, they can emulate that service as they mature. But the context of that service is their own bicultural fluency, which will be

different from their parents. At the same time, cultivating that service aims first at the role of the parents. If congregations encourage bicultural children in isolation from their parents, those children may not appreciate the value of participating together with their parents in the same Divine Service. When encouragement comes through parents and households rather than by partitioning the second generation from the first generation, parents and children draw closer to each other in the Christian faith, and the congregation benefits from the unique role of each. The first generation congregants benefit by the honor they receive from the congregation appreciating the faithful service of the second generation, since their parents have fostered these opportunities. In this way, households can help avoid the tensions that come from the second generation's different speed of acculturation because of their shared participation in the congregation's worship. And the congregation benefits from increased engagement with other first generation immigrants, other second generation immigrants, and people of all ethnicities who notice the faithful harmony of such a congregation.

Because Bridge People understand the issues surrounding first and second generation immigrants, they are well equipped to understand that evangelizing to first, second, and even third generation congregants ties families together based on their shared communion in the congregation. In the same way, they can encourage the whole multiethnic congregation away from considering themselves as atomistic individuals and toward viewing themselves as a communion that holds a common confession and has the responsibility to love and support one another. This can lead to evangelizing households of non-immigrant families as well.[20] When this happens, it takes seriously the stigma within many immigrant communities of breaking with the family culture. At the same time, it allows the native-born non-immigrant community to adapt by taking on godly and pious attributes of the immigrant communities. As Bridge People keenly feel the process of cultural adaptation and acculturation, they bring encouragement in growing closer together while growing under the Scriptures.

Cultural bridging for the sake of the Gospel can be as local as establishing new households of faith through bicultural marriage and as extensive as bridging countries with the Gospel. In discussing assimilation and transnationalism, Fernández-Kelly traces the latter term through the literature to include its use as a term for maintaining connections between countries across generations.[21] Mission work travels in multiple directions across such connections, so Bridge People benefit more than the local work of their congregations, even as they receive benefits in mission work from their international bonds. Moreover, as scholars have stated, those connections are not separate from assimilation for the second generation but are part of their assimilation process.[22] Christian identities are formed and reinforced across such ties, strengthening Bridge People in congregations for more robust mission field engagement.

There are many more opportunities for Bridge People working in LCMS congregations than space allows, and it is vital to remember that the second generation are not the only people able to operate in different cultural contexts with ease. The point here is that every Christian immigrant potentially carries extensive and robust networks.[23] Additionally, every non-Christian immigrant and non-immigrant needs the preaching of

the Gospel, and different immigrant generations serve as instruments in that work to differing degrees but with the same Gospel.

The unity that Bridge People can encourage in a multiethnic congregation setting itself serves the mission work of the congregation. This unity is one of confession and love. How can "unity" mean physical and cultural resemblance when Scripture clearly states, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28), and "Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all" (Col 3:11)? The Shepherd of Hermes makes this same point: "Having, therefore, received the seal [referring to Baptism], they had one understanding and one mind; and their faith became one, and their love one."[24]

Conclusion

Cultural tensions can exist in work done among and by immigrant mission fields. We need not deny that the tensions exist to notice the positive contributions to the mission activities of a congregation. Either dismissing or elevating ethnicity over all other considerations can derail those contributions. If the point were simply getting along, that would still not be a contribution to engaging mission fields with the Gospel.[25] If congregations subordinate ethnicity totally, they run the risk of ignoring the "concrete realities" of the estates we inhabit.[26] On the other hand, elevating ethnicity for its own sake runs the risk of missing the unity of the Church. Elevating ethnicity can also quickly become an opportunity to "Merely 'celebrate diversity' and then retreat into separate camps."[27] Counterintuitively, when getting along becomes the focus, relations break down. But when unity in confession becomes the focus, getting along follows behind the effort to live under the Scriptures. After all, the inspired Scriptures have no culture as their source but every culture as their addressees.[28] Or, as Jesus says, "Seek ye first …" (Matt 6:33, KJV).

The term *Bridge People* situates itself in the language of immigration theory. Nevertheless, it becomes useful for LCMS congregations' engagement of immigrant mission fields in its missiological function. The Bridge People in our congregations deserve our support for the tensions that their unique levels of cultural fluency bring. In this, they follow the pattern of the mission work of the Church described in the book of Acts. They deserve our support for their capacity as instruments to bring different cultures deeper into the Scriptures as the authority that lays claim to people of all cultures equally.

ENDNOTES

[1] Steven Ybarrola, "Diasporas and Multiculturalism: Social Ideologies, Liminality, and Cultural Identity," in *Human Tidal Wave: Global Migration, Megacities, Multiculturalism, Pluralism, Diaspora Missiology*, ed. Sadiri Joy Tira (Manila, Philippines: LifeChange, 2013), 146.
[2] Richard D. Alba and Victor Nee, *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 9–11.
[3] The Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) is a global research tool that measures immigrant integration based on eight categories: access to nationality, anti-discrimination, education, family

reunion, health, labor market mobility, permanent residence, and political participation. https://mipex.eu/.

[4] See how David R. Dunaetz deals with the term for its ability to work in two directions and its church planting applications in David R. Dunaetz, "Three Models of Acculturation: Applications for Developing a Church Planting Strategy among Diaspora Populations," in *Diaspora Missiology: Reflections on Reaching the Scattered Peoples of the World*, ed. Michael Pocock and Enoch Wan, Evangelical Missiological Society Series 23 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2015), 129–45.

[5] Margaret A. Gibson, "Immigrant Adaptation and Patterns of Acculturation," *Human Development* 44 (2001): 20.

[6] Ybarrola, "Diasporas and Multiculturalism," 144–45.

[7] Enoch Wan and Anthony Casey, *Church Planting among Immigrants in US Urban Centers: The "Where", "Why", and "How" of Diaspora Missiology in Action* (Portland: Institute of Diaspora Studies, 2014), 46. Dunaetz defines integration in a similar way as mutual cultural acquisition between groups in "Three Models of Acculturation," 140.

[8] Patricia Fernández-Kelly, "Assimilation through Transnationalism: A Theoretical Synthesis," in *The State and the Grassroots: Immigrant Transnational Organizations in Four Continents*, ed. Alejandro Portes and Patricia Fernández-Kelly, 1st edition. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), 291–93.

[9] Fernández-Kelly, "Assimilation through Transnationalism," 293; italics added.

[10] Jehu Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 376.

[11] Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, 376.

[12] Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 229–35; Matthew Aaron Buse, "The Multiethnic Congregation and Lutheran Missions: Toward an Old Orthodox Lutheran Diaspora Misssiology" (PhD diss., Concordia Theological Seminary, 2020), 219–23.

[13] The apostolic prohibitions are "to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood" (Acts 15:20). See the discussion of Acts 15 in Richard Bauckham, "James and the Gentiles (Acts 15:13–21)," in *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts*, ed. Ben Witherington (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 154–84; Ben III Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998).

[14] When referencing culture, I am using the definition given in my dissertation: "A set of shared moral judgements passed from generation to generation formed and continuously shaped by a body of individual decisions and judgements on behaviors and activities." Buse, "Multiethnic Congregation and Lutheran Missions." The influences for this definition are Roger Scruton, *Culture Counts: Faith and Feeling in a World Besieged* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007) and T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture: The Idea of a Christian Society and Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949).

[15] Johann Gerhard, *On the Nature of Theology and on Scripture*, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes, Theological Commonplaces (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 49–50; Robert Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture* (Mankato, MN: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 1955), 28.

[16] Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture*, 54.

[17] Gerhard, *On the Nature of Theology and on Scripture*, 54.

[18] Calov quoted in Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs, Around the Word Classic Reprints (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1876), 65.

[19] Gerhard, *On the Nature of Theology and on Scripture*, 62.
[20] A "straight line" model of assimilation assumes that immigrant communities give way to individualistic diffusion. As Hanciles writes, "Since full assimilation was understood in terms of *individual* mobility (at the expense of ethnic loyalty), the dissipation of the immigrants' collective identity was expected." Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, 236; italics in the original. But if diaspora groups maintain family networks across generations, one reasonably assumes that would apply to efforts in proclaiming the Gospel as well.
[21] Fernández-Kelly, "Assimilation through Transnationalism," 298.
[22] Fernández-Kelly, 308.
[23] As Hanciles puts it, "In simple terms, from both a biblical and a historical perspective, *every Christian migrant is a potential missionary*." Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, 378; italics in the original.
[24] Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., "The Pastor of Hermas," in *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire)*, trans. F. Crombie, vol. 2, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), ninth similitude, chap. xvii, p. 50.
[25] Though it should be mentioned that the social cohesion role for Bridge People also benefits the congregation; when no one gets along, mission work is hampered, after all. As one pastor remarked concerning a church council meeting, when the native English speakers started discussing a certain idea that the immigrant members knew would not work for various reasons, out of a sense of propriety it took the second-generation member of the council to voice what they were thinking, to which all then agreed.
[26] Eloise Hiebert Meneses, "Transnational Identities and the Church: Examining Contemporary Ethnicity and Place," *Mission Studies* 29 (2012): 73. Meneses writes, "People cannot be loved in the abstract. They can only be loved in the concrete realities of who they are as members of families, cultures, and ethnicities. Thus, while the church must subordinate ethnicity to its own oneness in Christ, it must not destroy ethnicity in favor of what would surely be a totalitarian single culture."
[27] Meneses, "Transnational Identities," 73.
[28] Meneses, 74–5.