

# SERVING GOD IN A MIGRANT CRISIS<sup>1</sup>

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**Key words:** *Migration, globalization*

## **Introduction**

There are few more emotive topics in the world today than the subject of migration. It has risen to the top of the world's political agenda as the world's leaders seek to grapple with the massive flows of population from rural to urban life, from country to country and continent to continent. The flows of these waves of migrants are hugely disruptive for the societies involved – the social cost, the cultural changes, the economic pressures and the raw human emotions felt cannot be ignored. Pass laws in apartheid South Africa, fences along the US border with Mexico, navies patrolling the Mediterranean and Pacific have done little to stem the flow. In our globalized world where news is instantly available this is likely to continue through much of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

As Christians we are just as affected – perhaps more so. Our concerns and fears are influenced by conscience – we know we have a responsibility towards these migrants to seek their physical and spiritual good. Yet too many try to hide from the problem and hope someone else will come forward with solutions. Their comfort zone is threatened. Those solutions will need to be faced by our church congregations, our Christian leaders, and by the way we train and disciple leaders for future ministry. We need to see also that these migrations are a God-given opportunity to disciple peoples little exposed to the Gospel. This is my aim in this paper.

## **My reason for writing this paper**

1. I am a migrant and descendent of migrants. My father was Irish – the descendent of the Irish Scotti migrants from Ireland to what became Scotland, whose descendants returned to Ulster in Ireland a millennium later in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century (think of the disruptive effects of this in Irish politics to today!). He migrated to England

to work as a doctor. He then married my mother. She was Dutch and she became a marriage migrant to England in 1937! We are all descendants of migrants!

2. I migrated to Africa after university to serve as a tent evangelist in South Africa and what was then Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and our main work was among the millions of Africans who had migrated to the slums in cities in that part of the world. I married a Californian bride who has now become a British citizen.
3. In my latter years of ministry my wife and I were responsible for the oversight of all the work of our mission agency, WEC International, in Europe – a ministry we recently handed over. The major component of our strategic thinking was how to help:
  - a. firstly **indigenous European churches and agencies** become involved in migrant outreach and discipling (few churches are committed or even equipped for this) and
  - b. secondly **expatriate agencies and immigrant churches** from Asia, Africa and Latin America to begin to make an impact on the spiritually needy indigenous Europeans. The need for effective co-operation between indigenous and migrant churches and for a multi-cultural approach became plain.
4. I see the migrant crisis as a great opportunity to start multi-cultural teams planting multi-cultural churches that are relevant and spiritually effective in the demanding environment of today's globalized world.

### **Facts about migration**

1. Our Bible is full of facts about migration from beginning to end – God was displeased when people did not migrate and he stopped the building of the Tower of Babel<sup>2</sup> in order to scatter the people. We now have to cope with the results – 7,000 languages and about 13,000 ethnic groups<sup>3</sup>. Abram was a migrant in Canaan, the Israelites were migrants from slavery in Egypt, the Samaritans a medley of enforced migrants, the huge Jewish Diaspora was a chief channel for the Gospel to the Gentiles in the early Church. Jesus Himself, as a child, was a refugee in Egypt. Then the Bible is full of how we, as believers, should treat the “stranger”<sup>4</sup>.

2. History records many migrations – the Roman Empire fell because of German tribal migrations, Arab migrations under the flag of Islamic jihad radically changed our world, European colonialism sparked numerous migrations – the worst aspect being the slave trade from Africa to the New World. North America became two nations with populations almost entirely made of migrants – with sad effects on the original inhabitants.
3. In modern times, the post-war migrations have been dramatic – Afro-Caribbeans and South Asians to Britain, Turks to Germany, North Africans to France and Belgium, the Korean Diaspora and Vietnamese “boat people” after their lands had been devastated by war. These have significantly changed Europe, North America and Australasia.
4. This century has produced one of the most severe dislocations through the turmoil caused by economic stress and wars in the world of Islam. The developing crisis in the latter since 2010 has severely threatened the political status quo in the West, and may be a big factor in a possible implosion of the European Union itself.
5. The United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) was set up in 1951 to cope with the resettlement of 1 million people after the Second World War. That number has increased to 15.1 million in 2015, which is the highest level ever. A further 5.1 million registered refugees are looked after in some 60 camps in the Middle East by United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), which was set up in 1949 to care for displaced Palestinians. The refugees of concern to UNHCR are spread around the world, with the largest number in sub-Saharan Africa (4.1 million), followed by Asia and the Pacific (3.8 million), Europe (3.5 million), the Middle East and North Africa (3.0 million) and the Americas (753,000). They live in widely varying conditions, from well-established camps

and collective centres to makeshift shelters or living in the open.<sup>5</sup> Since these figures were published we have seen the escalation in the number of Syrian civil war refugees with a total of about 11 million (over half the population, of which 6.5 million are within the borders of Syria itself).

No one knows the number of illegal immigrants in the world today. This could be in excess of 30 million – an estimated 10 million Central Americans in USA, several million sub-Saharan Africans in Europe and now millions of Afghans, Iraqis, Syrians, Somalis and Eritreans flooding into Europe across the Mediterranean. People smuggling is now a bigger business than drug trafficking. In 2010 the prestigious journal, the Economist, estimated that there were 400,000 to 500,000 migrants smuggled into the European Union every year, and this had increased to 1 million in 2015<sup>6</sup>. The UN Office for Drugs and Crime reckon that it costs between \$2,000 and \$10,000 for every illegal immigrant to reach their destination<sup>7</sup>. This means that these 30 million illegals have netted criminals \$60-100 billion, and few of the criminals are ever caught. The flow is virtually unstoppable and is likely to continue for another generation. The very poor living at subsistence level cannot afford to migrate, so the relative lessening of poverty in the last decade has actually increased the number of migrants. Note how many of the migrants have smart phones as an essential component of their escape tooling.

How can we, as Christians, exercise a ministry that addresses the root causes and devastating effects of this massive flow of people – especially those who are labelled ‘illegals’? Some pointers are given in this paper.

The reality is that large-scale migration will continue to be a factor in our lifetime. Falling birthrates in nearly every EuNAPa (Europe, N America, Pacific)<sup>8</sup> and many developed Asian countries are leading to massive population deficits with work forces too small to support an ageing population. That deficit is a vacuum that will be filled from AfAsLA (Africa, Asia and Latin America) countries whether we like it or not. We cannot hide our head in the sand; we need to face up to the challenge and see it as an opportunity for the Gospel since the majority will come from closed lands with few Christians.

## Addressing the causes of migration

The push factors:

1. **War** has displaced millions in recent years. In this century alone we have had tragic genocidal wars in Africa – Rwanda and Burundi, the Somali civil war, Boko Haram in Nigeria and beyond and in the Muslim World in turmoil with the conflict between Sunni and Shi'a Islam (impacting Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Afghanistan and Pakistan), and the tensions between jihadist Islamists and the wider body of Sunni Islam.<sup>9</sup> Christian ministries have been effective in giving physical and spiritual help to some, but labourers are few, and financial aid to such ministries are declining through donor fatigue. On a wider scale these Muslim-originating conflicts have given unprecedented openings for the Gospel as many turn from the unending violence and vengefulness displayed to seek the Prince of Peace<sup>10</sup>. We reckon that in 1960 there were less than 100,000 individuals and their offspring that were once Muslim but were then Christians. This number has grown to around 10 million today, with a great global acceleration since “911”. Now is the time to reach out in love to our Muslim neighbours. The challenge is that few have the understanding and training to adapt and minister effectively.
2. **Tyranny** is another major factor in stimulating legal and illegal emigrations. Sadly such misrule has devastated many African countries – Zimbabwe, Eritrea, Libya, etc. provoking millions to flee. How are these distraught people to be ministered to? How can our churches disciple those able to become honest leaders for their people?
3. **Corruption** has crippled many countries around the world in developing the infrastructure or income-generating industries. I only know of one African country that has taken a strong stand against corruption – Botswana – and this poor desert land has benefited. It is amazing to see how many Africans and South Asians become wealthy and influential when they emigrate to lands where corruption is lower and social networks do not stifle them. Too few Christians take a strong stand against this evil.

4. **Natural disasters** – Growing populations make the 21<sup>st</sup> Century likely to have mass movements of population through drought (Yemen<sup>11</sup>, Pakistan<sup>12</sup>, the Sahel), from super-volcanoes, possible sea-level rises with global warming and new diseases like Ebola<sup>13</sup>. How do we prepare our people for coping with such unexpected events?

### **The pull factors**

1. **Education** – millions of students go annually to study in other countries – especially in the West. Many do not return to their homelands, but find good jobs in their adopted lands. Since 1980 millions of Chinese have studied outside China. It is reckoned that possibly 30% do not return home and about 20% become Christians during the course of their studies. This highlights two areas of important ministry for Christians – how to improve the well-being and educational standards of their country to slow that brain drain that the country can ill afford? And how to evangelise those migrant students who are not believers – many countries have been blessed through students who return home to proclaim their faith.
2. **Freedom** – Persecution has grown significantly since the fall of Communism. Communists severely persecuted and marginalized all religions – especially Christians. Many thought that persecution would then decrease. This has proved otherwise, but the persecutors have changed. Jihadist Islam has decimated the indigenous ancient Christian population of the Middle East – especially in Iraq and Syria. However in some countries such as Iran and Algeria, the number of believers has grown in dramatic church growth in the past decade despite persecution, but many have had to flee for their lives. There is also severe persecution by Sunni Muslims of the Baha’i and Ahmaddiya and Shi’a Muslims, and Rohingya Muslims by Buddhists in Myanmar. Many have sought refuge in the West.
3. **Economic betterment** – It astonishes me how willing millions of Africans are prepared to cross the Sahara, suffer in Libya and risk their lives on overcrowded boats to cross to Europe, or millions of Pakistanis to leave their homelands and travel across the war-torn

Middle East and suffer constant indignities and likely repatriation as “just” economic refugees ineligible for asylum. Many want escape from grinding poverty exacerbated by corruption, social injustice, and limited opportunities for betterment. We have so many failed states facing a bleak future. I am passionate about the power of the Gospel to save, to heal, to bring change in broken lives, but I am also concerned that our application of the Great Commission has individualised the application of the Gospel that we leave out the changing of society. Our English Bibles have emphasised this because we do not have an English verb “TO disciple”. The beginning phrase of Matthew 28:19 is thus distorted to “... Go and make disciples of all nations....”, when the Greek says, “...in going disciple all nations...”. Too little has been preached in Africa about the Gospel as nation building, and culture transforming. Creating a redeemed culture and rebuilding nations on the foundation of the Gospel is also part of the Great Commission! This would decrease the need for people to leave their homeland.

### **The benefits deriving from immigration**

- 1. Improved productivity:** Countries that have welcomed and integrated large migrant populations have seen great improvements in their economies. I am British and I do not know how we would manage without Indian medical workers and shopkeepers and Central European agricultural workers. Well educated Nigerians, Zimbabweans and Ghanaians are numerous in many top professional roles. The problems come if the immigrant populations do not integrate as has happened too often with Pakistanis in Britain, North Africans in France and Turks in Germany – and most of these are Muslims.
- 2. Dynamic Christian migrants:** Well over half the immigrants to EuNAPa are at least nominally Christian, but also with a higher proportion of active, born again believers. The number of immigrant churches has multiplied across EuNAPa countries. This is an enormous potential asset for receiving countries, and has potential for re-energising indigenous churches with new spiritual life.

- 3. Opportunities for the Gospel:** The immigrant Christians are evangelizing both the increasingly secularizing indigenous populations and also the non-Christian migrants. This has global implications. It was only in 2001 that the first virtually complete listing of all the world's languages and peoples was published.<sup>14</sup> The most accessible list is that of the Joshua Project<sup>15</sup>. The total number of people groups in the world is 13,000 – 16,000 (depending on definitions). These can all be grouped into 256 People Clusters and then these into 15 Affinity Blocs of peoples. The 256 Clusters generally have names we all recognise such as the Fulbe/Fulani, Mande in the sub-Saharan Africa Affinity Bloc, The Berbers and Levantine Arabs in the Arab Affinity Bloc, and the Kurds and Tajik of the Indo-Iranian Affinity Bloc. This theme is more fully developed in my book *The Future of the Global Church*<sup>16</sup>. Most of these Clusters have emigrant communities in continents around the world – many in countries open for the Gospel, but from countries that have raised strong barriers to the preaching of the Gospel. We need global strategies for globalizing peoples. So from a Kingdom perspective these immigrant communities present a vital and strategic opportunity that will deeply impact their original homelands. Let us enlarge our vision and use this opportunity for God's Kingdom!

### **Overcoming hindrances to ministry to or by migrants**

- 1. Attitudes:** For many years the Homogenous Unit principle was pushed<sup>17</sup> as the best approach for church planting. People prefer to live alongside and worship with those most like themselves. This worked reasonably well in homogenous rural tribal situations, but it does not in our urbanizing world. Too many indigenous and immigrant churches practice this, but it makes outreach to other sections of society or to (other) immigrants very difficult. This strategy is the opposite to that of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. The very fact that those apostles spoke in other languages as the Spirit gave them utterance is His message to us – this Gospel must go into other languages – an aspect few Pentecostal churches have highlighted. Contrast the Jerusalem Church with its favouring of Hebrew speakers and holding on



to Jewish cultural traits and the Antioch Church with its multi-cultural leadership and membership and the mission movement that spread out across the known world of that day. It requires good teaching of what the Scriptures say about the stranger and exemplary modelling by church leaders. It requires time and patience to overcome the fears and prejudices so prevalent among Christians. The fear is greatest when people are confronted with those who deliberately refuse to adapt culturally. How do people react to a woman wearing a niqab or a man with a bushy black beard and skull cap?

2. **Culture:** Christians must be willing to carefully assess the impact of their own cultural emphases (often not biblical!) in their Christian worship and outreach. I remember the bewilderment of Southern Chad Christians living in the Muslim North of their country when they found a negative attitude to open air preaching. I see the frustration of African churches in Europe with their exuberant dancing and singing repelling indigenous people. How willing are we to go along with the challenge of the East African Revival 70 years ago – “Tribalism was crucified on the cross with Jesus!”? We must adapt for outsiders to feel welcome and yet give freedom for treasured aspects of home cultures to find expression.
3. **Governments:** There must be controls. Governments do need to scrutinise all who desire to enter their lands. Yet for refugees and legal immigrants this must be done with sensitivity and reasonable speed. All too often the behaviour of governments has been cruel, inconsistent, and subject to interminable delays. Christians should be spokespeople for those abused and press for humane changes.
4. **Lack of Training:** In 2007 we estimate that for the first time the number of people living in the world’s cities became more than those in rural areas. This is likely to rise to a 90% urban population in 2100. We are going to see massive language extinctions in the coming decades as more and more migrate to cities. Urban churches have to adapt, or die as they will lose their children to majority urban or global languages. Yet few of those in training for ministry in seminaries and Bible schools are given any tools to

cope with urban ministry and planting or growing multi-cultural churches. It is a scandal to send out those who will pastor a church but not be able to minister effectively in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century world.

### **Possibilities for ministry to migrants**

1. **At a personal level:** the friendliness and hospitality of local Christians to immigrants has had a dramatic impact in bringing people to faith in Christ. This has been especially true for foreign university students. Yet sadly so many study in the West but in all their years of study, never receive an invitation into an indigenous home.
2. At a congregational level much can be done. Every church that is being effective in witness, whether immigrant or indigenous should have a congregation that increasingly reflects the age patterns, social levels and ethnic diversity of their local areas. Action steps that should be initiated:
  - a. A strong focus on prayer for the communities in the area.
  - b. A visionary leadership that is able to motivate and activate the congregation into a real concern for the strangers in their midst.
  - c. An effective training for the leadership and membership to be confident to reach out to other cultures in the area. This could be done by members with cross-cultural expertise or by Christian mission agencies.
  - d. Finding effective ways of connecting with (other) immigrant cultures. These could include:
    - i. Giving host language teaching – maybe separately for men and women
    - ii. Running Mums and Toddlers groups
    - iii. Offering help with filling out immigration and government papers and dealing with officialdom or the legal system – especially with those seeking asylum
    - iv. Assistance to help immigrants find employment.
    - v. Engage in sporting activities
    - vi. Finding housing

vii. Holding special events – Christmas and Easter, picnics, outings.

viii. Encouraging invitations to private homes.

All these give opportunities for developing deeper relationships and opportunities to speak of the Lord and to disciple these people from even before their conversion.

- e. A possible partnering with a Christian agency with expertise in, say reaching Muslims, or Buddhists. This could involve a missionary being part of the leadership team, or a combined church-mission team for specific ministry outreach.
- f. Networking with local indigenous and immigrant churches, and possible forming of combined teams.
- g. Developing a strategy of how to disciple and integrate immigrant community Christians into the wider church life. This could take a number of formats:
  - i. Disciple or Bible Study groups, alpha courses, etc in an immigrant or indigenous language
  - ii. Hosting an immigrant church to use the indigenous church facilities for their meetings.
- h. A long-term plan for integration by immigrant churches as the second generation becomes more comfortable in the host culture. Too many immigrant churches collapse after a generation because their children do not feel at home.

In recent years I have been involved in a number of conferences in which mission and church leaders have gathered to pray and strategize about how to cope with the growing migrant crisis in Europe.

The cry from African pastors was for closer fellowship with indigenous churches, how to reach the indigenous population of post-Christian Europe and how to ensure that they did not lose their children who no longer fitted into their parental culture. The plea of indigenous church leaders was for help on how to reach out to immigrants, how to disciple those who sought the Lord and what pattern of church should emerge from such outreach.

I am convinced that multi-cultural teams are essential – but that too is a challenge! We need the knowledge and expertise of the local Christians and we need the innovation and energies of immigrant Christians who actually expect that God answers prayer, and that enthusiastic witness will win the lost and that deliverance from sickness and demons is possible through the power of the Holy Spirit. Local Christians rarely have an understanding of immigrant cultures and are often the least able to get alongside them, but working with other immigrant believers gives both an entrance and an effectiveness that brings results.

For this to happen Christian leaders of all cultures in the area need to build strong relationships based on prayer and their common relationship to the Lord Jesus. In some cities this has happened, but far too many multi-cultural cities do not have such networks.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This is the title of my most recent book, written with Dean Merrill. I have taken some of the thoughts from this book and adapted them for this article. Here I seek to look at the crisis and opportunities more from an African perspective and the contribution that could be made through African churches and mission agencies. Johnstone, Patrick with Merrill, Dean. *Serving God in a Migrant Crisis*, 2016, Global Mapping International, Colorado Springs.
- <sup>2</sup> Genesis 11:1-9
- <sup>3</sup> Mandryk, Jason, *Operation World*, 2010, Biblica then 2011, Intervarsity Press. Downers Grove, IL, USA.,<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 19:33-34; 24:22; Exodus 23:9; Matthew 25:35; Hebrews 13:1-2.
- <sup>5</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/>
- <sup>6</sup> *The Economist* 2010 and 6<sup>th</sup> Feb 2016
- <sup>7</sup> <https://www.unodc.org/toc/en/crimes/migrant-smuggling.html>
- <sup>8</sup> I avoid using other common terms (Developed and Developing World, Global South, West/non-West, etc.) because they are either patronising or inaccurate. AfAsLA and EuNAPa are simply geographical descriptors which I used extensively in publications in recent years.

- 9 Johnstone, Patrick. *The Future of the Global Church; Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2011, USA, 77, .*
- 10 Ibid., 78.
- 11 Yemen's present civil war between the Shi'a Houthis and Sunni tribes has already reached the limits of its water resources. We could see millions of refugees fleeing to East Africa.
- 12 Pakistan will have nearly ½ billion people in 2050 – all depending on one river, the Indus. If the monsoon fails we may see 20-50 million water refugees.
- 13 Ibid Ch 1.
- 14 Ibid Ch7, 168
- 15 <https://joshuaproject.net>
- 16 Ibid Ch 7
- 17 Dr. Donald McGavran's definition of a homogeneous unit is "a section of society in which all members have some characteristic in common." In plainer terms, a homogeneous unit is a group of people that have ethnic, linguistic, social, educational, or vocational similarities. In terms of a church congregation, ethnic, social, and educational commonalities are the most important. This can be helpful in the initial evangelistic and discipling process, but is not so helpful as a stable fellowship emerges.