

Migration and the African Christian Diaspora in the United States: Imperative of Cross-cultural Mission

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Introduction

It is pedestrian knowledge that the United States is made up of a diversity of people(s) from different parts of the world. Either by voluntary or involuntary migration, people who were citizens of other countries but now make their living in the United States constitute the Diaspora community. The law, policy and process of obtaining entry and immigration to the United States exult in promoting that diversity. Consequently, the United States of America is home to an amalgam of people of different races, sexes, statuses and creeds. A sizable percentage of the Diaspora community comes from Africa. In ‘the land of the free’ that is the United States, several cultures and belief systems find ground to seed, tend, and perpetuate their expressions.

A Glimpse into the American Cultural Setting

America has emerged as a corollary to the Biblical story of the Samaritan people who carved their distinct identity from neighboring Israel. Samaria emerged in the era of a fractured Israel that lived in disobedience to God. An Assyrian king had defeated Samaria (then headquarters of the Northern Kingdom of Israel), deported some of her citizens to his country, and resettled Assyrians and other vanquished people groups in its place (see 2 Kings 15:29; 17:1-24). Over time, relationships developed into

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intermarriages between the Jewish remnant and the ‘settlers’, and there evolved a mixture of cultures and religions that took deep root and grew.² Emetuche states: “North America has and will continue to be a people like the Samaritans...(and will) never (be) like any other nation or people on earth.”³

Emetuche cites Lind’s work,⁴ which gives a glimpse to a three-stage evolution of America’s nationhood. According to Michael Lind’s *The Next American Nation*, the first stage is the Anglo-American, ‘from the Revolutionary War until the Civil War.’ The content of this nation reveals the national community to be dominantly Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Germanic in population, protestant Christian in religion, and federal-republican in political ideology. The second stage is the Euro-American era, “which developed after the civil war (sic) and lasted until the Civil Rights Movement.”⁵ The distinctive of this stage is the acknowledgment of the genuine American as anyone of European descent that is also a Christian. To this period belongs “the elimination of limitations on white male suffrage to the post-Civil War transmission of basic civil rights up to federal democracy.”⁶

The third stage, jargonized as the Third American Republic, “started in the 1950s-1970s with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement and ushered in the multicultural America...in which we live today.”⁷ Lind considers the present stage as “American

2 See Tracey M. Lewis-Giggetts, *The Integrated Church: Authentic Multicultural Ministry* (Kansas City, KS: Beacon Hill Press, 2011), pp. 69-82.

3 Damian O. Emetuche, “A Case for Multicultural Church Plant” in www.GlobalMissiology.org, Vol. 2 No. 10 (2013) of January 2013, p. 2.

4 Michael Lind, *The Next American Nation* (New York: Free Press, 1995), p. 11 quoted by Emetuche, *ibid.*

5 Emetuche, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

6 Lind, *supra*, p. 12.

7 Emetuche, *ibid.*

liberal nationalism”⁸ resulting in the position where “the US social system will be a “color-blind, gender-neutral regime of individual rights...combined with government activism promoting a high degree of substantive social and economic equality.”⁹ Emetuche differs on this conclusion by stressing his own point that “America is still changing, (and it) will dramatically change...into a “Samaritan nation.”¹⁰

Several research works and publications back up Emetuche’s position. For example, a *Pew Research Center* report indicates trends on inter-racial or inter-ethnic marriages show an uncommon surge. “Among all newlyweds in 2010, 9% of whites, 17% of blacks, 26% of Hispanics and 28% of Asians married out. Looking at all married couples in 2010, regardless of when they married, the share of intermarriages reached an all-time high of 8.4%. In 1980, that share was just 3.2%.”¹¹ Similar reports contain evidence of a growing number of trans-racial adoptions, and a liberal definition of marriage, which includes people of the same sex now having legal authority to marry in several states in the US. The summation is that the United States is “religiously pluralistic”¹² and has become a “much more multicultural and tolerant society.”¹³

The African Diaspora, Diversity and Church Planting in the United States

In the light of the above analysis on changing demographics to which the Diaspora contributes, it is noteworthy that diversity is becoming increasingly common in schools, malls, apartments, hospitals, parks, the workplace, etc. To this end, one may

8 Ibid

9 Lind, op. cit., p. 15.

10 Emetuche, *ibid.*

11 Ibid, quoting Wendy Wang, “The Rise of Intermarriage: Rates, Characteristics Vary by Race and Gender,” in <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/02/16/the-rise-of-intermarriage/>.

12 Ibid., p. 5.

13 Ibid.

assert that there is some degree of assimilation, association and integration for immigrants when they relocate to the United States. This does not suggest that the process for attaining this is easy, but it is surmountable. The issue is, how is (should) the Church (be) responding to the Diaspora phenomenon? Woo poses a similar question: “The world has moved next door to the Church in the United States....what will the church do about the painful divide that presently separates the church in the United States?”¹⁴ The response may be evaluated from two angles: the Church in the United States; and the African Christian leader who comes into, or lives in, the United States with a desire to fulfill God’s redemptive mission.

Anecdotal evidence suggests Christian immigrants invariably connect themselves with a church family with which they have been previously associated and have cultural or ethnic affinity, or whose location is close to their abode. This is usually a resort to identity and convenience. Unfortunately, primary relationships, associations and connections develop along these cultural and ethnic affinities, relegating to the background true Christian unity and community, thereby making the eradication of prejudice and segregation based on race difficult to attain. This is contrary to the Biblical teaching that God has removed the often-hostile dividing line that separated men from Him and from each other, and that He is building out of believers His united family (Ephesians 2:19-22). In fact, it gives credence to the oft-quoted statement of the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that “Sunday 11:00 a.m. is the most segregated time in America.”

When African Christian immigrants move to the comfort zone of identifying only

¹⁴ Rodney M. Woo, *The Color of Church: A Biblical and practical Paradigm for Multicultural Churches* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), p. 91.

with African-initiated Churches, they do not demonstrate any marked difference from what is obvious in existing American churches that have developed along racial lines. In both cases, whether immigrant or indigenous American, “the Church needs to develop cultural intelligence in order to fully realize the many-colored tapestry that God is weaving together.”¹⁵

One area in which the Church in the United States can express her unity and promote God’s kingdom agenda involves building multicultural churches that incorporate diversity in ministry. This is accomplished by being “sensitive to all the experiences and differences that people bring,” and beyond the acknowledgement of differences of race, ethnicity and culture.¹⁶

Multicultural ministry is the development and implementation of heterogeneous models of communicating the gospel, through beliefs and behaviors, which are sensitive to the needs of the culturally diverse population within a church’s field of service, creating a community that celebrates unity in diversity in Christ.¹⁷

The reality of the Diaspora and diversity in daily contacts, businesses and relationships generate community in society. “There is significant momentum with an increasingly multi-ethnic society, greater awareness of the reality of diversity, and the growing sense of the need for multiethnic churches.”¹⁸ It is odd that in this generation when government departments, corporations and political/civic organizations commit men, materials and money in a bid to attaining heterogeneity and multiculturalism, the Church is lagging far behind.

15 Soong-Chan Rah, *Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a changing church* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2010), p. 12.

16 Caleb Rosado, “Multicultural Ministry: The Theory” from www.rosado.net/pdf/Multicultural_Ministry_Theory.pdf, p. 1 accessed on July 5, 2012.

17 Ibid., p. 2.

18 Soong-Chan Rah, *Many Colors*, op. cit., p. 15.

Historically, the Church has always reflected the attitudes of the society in which it is situated. Rah notes the history of segregation in the Church in Alabama during the Civil Rights Movement, and concludes it was aided by that era's church's leadership which was largely believed to have belonged to (or had sympathy for), the separatist Ku Klux Klan. The consequence is that it drove, between Black and Caucasian Christians and churches, a wedge that persists to this day. The result is that the church groups developed their unique paces, traditions, styles and relationships. Subsequent actions and attitudes by different and succeeding churches and ministries have not adequately minimized this problem.¹⁹ For example, foremost missionary, Church growth specialist and apologist Donald McGavran is credited with advancing the homogenous unit principle of church growth. The principle harps on "the importance of allowing persons to become Christians without forcing them to cross cultural barriers."²⁰

The common argument promoting this theory is that homogenous churches grow faster than multiethnic churches. Rosado²¹ argues against this principle as "far removed from the essence of the Gospel,"²² because the thrust of the gospel of Jesus Christ is change that saves from sin and obedience to the principles of God's Kingdom, not numerical growth.²³ Emetuche states that the underlying reason for promoting the homogenous unit principle in church planting is rooted in its appeal to man's fallen nature and heightened cultural sensitivity. He postulates that while this aligns with

19 Ibid., pp. 41-59, esp. pp. 52-56.

20 Damian Emetuche "Church Planting: Past and Present in America!" in www.GlobalMissiology.org vol. 4 No. 9 July, 2012, p. 7.

21 Caleb Rosado is Professor of Urban Studies at Warner Pacific College in Portland, Oregon and has written extensively on multiculturalism and multicultural ministry.

22 Caleb Rosado, "Multicultural Ministry: The Theory", *supra*, p. 1.

23 Ibid.

sociocultural reality, it differs on the biblical basis.²⁴ Nonetheless this principle has a large following.

Churches and other forms of ministries continue to develop along racially identifiable lines. Though these may not bear obvious marks of segregation, the polarity that this unwittingly engenders makes an average immigrant give a second thought before identifying with homogenous unit churches. In reaction, most African immigrants join African churches or initiate ministries to, and among other Africans. Emetuche stresses further or other consequences:

Non-European immigrants, in reaction to the racialized culture of the American church, have planted immigrant and ethnic congregations. Many of these, on close inspection, are not more than sub-sociocultural organizations with myopic missionary agenda and which further segregate the people of faith. One of the consequences of this homogenous principle is that while immigrant groups are planting churches, and many of those churches may be growing, the reality is that their growth is more of recycling Christians from their ethnic backgrounds and not pushing back darkness through discipling new converts from the field.²⁵

The Church can make the difference. As Christ's disciples, Jesus states that the Church is 'the salt of the earth, light of the world, and a city set on a hill that cannot be hid' (Matthew 5:13-16). Woo admonishes: "The Church should not look or act or think like the world. The world naturally gravitates toward homogenous groupings, but God places a call that disrupts and confronts that comfort mentality."²⁶

A Vision of All Nations Gathered at God's Throne: Reflecting the Church's Response to Diversity and the Diaspora Phenomenon

Diaspora in America creates diversity. Diversity by itself can create tension. This is because when several cultures and ethnicities converge, there are bound to be

24 Emetuche, supra., p. 9.

25 Ibid.

26 Woo, op. cit., p. 50.

differences and divergences of perspectives and viewpoints. When these differences arise, leadership must take intentional steps to create an atmosphere promoting respect, inclusiveness and synergy. Deliberate efforts need to be made toward understanding others, instead of demanding to be understood by them. This intentionality should also include developing an attitude toward learning, correcting, and applying principles that promote the mission agenda. The chief issue here is to contextualize delivering the Gospel in a manner that penetrates, and serves, the host communities in which immigrants dwell. When and where necessary, Christians must be willing to ask questions about issues they do not seem to understand. A multicultural setting always bears different perspectives and viewpoints, which requires that individuals express flexibility in relating and or appreciating others. Ott states:

Of the practical skills that a missionary needs, the most obvious are the ability to adapt to the lifestyle of another culture and the ability to communicate clearly in another language. Ultimately, the Gospel must be contextualized into thought forms and expressions that are appropriate to the culture while remaining faithful to scripture....Diaspora is one way by which people become bicultural and through which people are prepared for cross-cultural mission.²⁷

At the same time, the Church must emphasize the priority of unity, the message of Christ, the cross and His kingdom, and God's mission to which He calls His Church.²⁸ African Christian immigrants initiating or participating in either church planting or mission need to be aware of this and commit themselves to the above principles from the onset.

²⁷ Craig Ott, "Diaspora and Relocation as Divine Impetus for Witness in the Early Church" in Enoch Wan (ed.), *Diaspora Missiology: Theory, Methodology, and Practice* (Portland, Oregon: Institute of Diaspora Studies USA, 2011), p. 89.

²⁸ Caleb Rosado, "Multicultural Ministry: The Theory" *supra*, makes engaging reading on the subject matter.

Living in America, Christian immigrants already maintain contact via their commutes, jobs, schools, clinics and neighborhoods. Church participation, attendance and ministry are calls to commitment, not convenience. Accordingly, it is imperative that, as Emetuche suggests:

a local church (should) be as diverse as the community it is situated as (any) church planting effort targeting a particular segment of its community to the neglect of other population groups of the same community is not representing the church that Jesus died to redeem....²⁹

Initiating or building single-culture churches or ministries in a pluralist society like the United States means that the missionary obeys the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19) and Great Commandment (Matthew 23:37-39) only in part. This takes the Gospel to a particular group within a pluralist setting. It achieves a parochial, narrow objective, impeding the fulfillment of Christ's mandate to preach the gospel to all creatures (Mark 16:15). When African Christian immigrants in a host community do ministry like this, they perpetuate the provincialist ethos prevalent in existing churches in the United States. They do not utilize the obvious advantage offered by residency in the diverse culture of the United States: namely, that they do not have to go to far places for mission; and they already have large numbers of non-Christian immigrants from different nations, as well as native, host neighbors to minister to.

Jesus laid down the Great commission for the disciples mandating them to; “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19, 20 NIV). Without doubt, every Christian today is Jesus' disciple, upon whom this commission

29 Damian O. Emetuche, “A Case for Multicultural Church Plant”, supra at p. 12.

places a demand. The Diaspora phenomenon creates proximity for Jesus' followers to make this happen.

The Great Commission is a mandate requiring loving obedience from the Christian. Indeed, living in obedience to Christ's commandments is an expression of love to the Lord and Master of the Mission Agenda (John 14:21). Discipleship requires submission to His discipline, including taking Jesus' message to the nations. In the Diaspora, God orchestrates the intermingling of different people groups. Through that process, Christian immigrants have the opportunity to proclaim the redemption message in any available location by their presence and their actions. Placing comfort and convenience above commitment hinders the ability to recognize God-created niches that they might occupy in the harvest. This is a trap that limits God's message of universal reconciliation to His universe. In a way, one may assert that the early disciples either did not understand the extent of the reach of this vision, or appreciate the cost associated with fulfilling it. If Jesus' disciples understood Him, they did not demonstrate the immediacy required in obeying His instructions. "Apparently the majority of scattered Christians were reluctant to preach the Gospel to Gentiles."³⁰

The disciples had embraced their commission and waited (and prayed) for the promised Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). When He came (Acts 2:1-13), He empowered and enabled them to boldly preach Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah who would save any who believed in Him (Acts 2:22-41). But because the apostles' ministry had a remarkable success at Jerusalem, they settled there, in stark negation of Jesus' command to make disciples in Jerusalem, and beyond. "The New Testament church was somewhat reluctant

³⁰ Op. cit., Craig Ott, "Diaspora and Relocation as Divine Impetus for Witness in the Early Church" in Enoch Wan (ed.), *Diaspora Missiology*, p. 79.

to reach across racial and geographical lines in order to fulfill the Great Commission of making disciples of all nations”³¹, quips Woo. The result of this refusal or reluctance to follow through with the instructions of the Lord Jesus Christ brought a major upheaval. Persecution, which seems to later be identified as the singular most common label for Jesus’ followers, came on the Church. One could say God either employed or permitted persecution to ‘smoke out’ the Church from her comfort zone and deploy her members as He intended.

The Church at Jerusalem was dispersed to many cities, notably Judea, Samaria (Acts 8:1), Damascus (Acts 9), and beyond (Acts 10 and 13) – interestingly in the order that Jesus Christ commanded. Evangelism and mission gained traction. Many Gentiles (non-Jews) accepted Jesus Christ as the Messiah. Craig Ott concludes that “persecution and the scattering of the Jerusalem Church proved to be the divine impetus for these early breakthroughs...persecution gave the impetus of mission to the nations in the early church.”³² Rodney Woo additionally explains:

As a result (of this reluctance; my addition), God’s strategy of moving the church out of its comfort zone entailed a great persecution against the church at Jerusalem. Yet the ones who heard the command of Jesus to cross racial lines were the very ones who refused to move out of their racial comfort zones (Acts 8:1). In addition to permitting persecution, God sent an Ethiopian eunuch to Jerusalem to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. It is insightful that Philip encountered this seeker on the road to Gaza from Jerusalem and not in Ethiopia. At that time, Ethiopians were considered to be living in the ends of the earth...in a similar global movement, the world has moved next door to the church in the United States.³³

The Church of Jesus Christ is sent out to the world, and not to sit in the pews expecting people to walk in to the worship centers in search of God. In His

31 Rodney M. Woo, *The Color of Church*, p. 91.

32 Op. cit., Craig Ott, “Diaspora and Relocation as Divine Impetus for Witness in the Early Church” in Enoch Wan (ed.), *Diaspora Missiology*, pp. 81-82.

33 Op. cit., Rodney M. Woo, *The Color of Church*, p. 91.

orchestration,³⁴ God permits or utilizes the Diaspora as means of reaching the nations with His Gospel, and this happens two ways – reaching fellow immigrants with the Gospel, and using the Diaspora to minister among immigrants and the host, receiving community. This is especially true for a pluralist, diverse America. The African Christian Diaspora can, and needs to, plug into this opportune orchestration and offer to serve on both ends of God’s redemptive agenda.

Deliberate building of multi-cultural ministries creates platforms for Christians to cultivate and develop identity about the cross of Christ, not ethnicity. This reflects an answer to Jesus’ prayer for His church’s unity (John 17:23) and echoes the universality of the heritage of a sin-sick humanity, all candidates of God’s grace, (to be) obtained by faith in the redeeming blood of the Lamb of God. Ultimately, we get the vision of the nations gathered before God, praising that Lamb as revealed in the Bible:

And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation (Revelation 5:9, KJV).

This gives a glimpse of how, at the end of time, all believers of different tongues and languages gather at the throne. Only a cross-cultural ministry represents that picture of a foretaste of heaven.

³⁴ See Narry F. Santos, “Exploring the Major Dispersion Terms and Realities in the Bible” in Enoch Wan (ed.), *Diaspora Missiology: Theory, Methodology, and Practice*, pp. 21-38.