

Doing Missions as Participants in Diaspora

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Abstract

Missions today includes the growing impact of the global South's role in missions. A significant part of this role is what is happening through migration and diaspora contexts as many of these people are devout Christians and many are going to the West, where the church is in decline. As the church accepts this reality, it is important to look at the resulting cultural adjustment and how it can be an important part of the preparation for this group to be involved in missions. Embracing the marginality that can happen in this stage is a lead to taking on the pilgrim mentality that is an important part of the history of God's people. As migrants and missionaries build a kingdom identity this can be used to call others into God's kingdom.

Introduction

Doing missions today is not the same as it was even a generation ago. Gone, and undoubtedly for the better, are the days in which the stereotypical missionary was a white man in a pith hat on an adventure. Gone are the days in which the West, as the primary missions player, was the focal point of missions. Missions today includes the recognition of the vital role of the global church coming of age and learning to assume its role in missions.

At the same time that the number of intentionally sent missionaries from the global south is increasing, another key factor in this shift in doing missions today is the growth of the international migrant population and the corresponding *Christian diaspora or scattered*

community. A desirable outcome of this reality that could increase the missionary involvement of the Christian diaspora community is for the church to take on a vision of itself that is more closely akin to the biblical concept of being a pilgrim rather than that of being a settler in a promised land, a concept that is part of the church culture in the US (Jackson, 2011, p. 15). Passages such as Leviticus 25:23 “you are but aliens and my tenants” and I Peter 2:11 “aliens and strangers in the world” remind us that God’s people are not to be permanently settled in this world. Embracing this perspective enables us to be open to life as pilgrimage which allows us to have “transformative encounters with God” (Barbour, 2010, p. 57-58). It is this objective that is behind this exploration of missions and diaspora, as mission ministry is marked by “transition, impermanence, and sojourn” (Jackson 2011, p. 15) which are traits of life within the diaspora setting.

The transformative process of being a pilgrim or sojourner is a significant factor in “Doing Missions as Participants in Diaspora”, and is applicable to both the Christian diaspora community and the missionary. The dynamics involved in this process, lead to growth that offers insight into the role of the diaspora participants in becoming missionaries not only to the diaspora and host community, but also to others beyond their immediate context; and to the role of the missionary to those in diaspora as they are challenged to identify with the migrant as a part of their ministry.

Diaspora in the history of God’s biblical mission

The element of diaspora in God’s mission to the world is evident throughout the Bible. Beginning with Abram leaving Ur with his father to eventually be called to move again (Genesis 11:27-12:1), God continually worked with people in transition who were either migrants or in

diaspora. This phenomena is seen in the Old Testament as both part of God's plan for blessing the world (Abraham) and as pushing people to disperse (Babel)—a consequence of sin, or not fulfilling God's plan. It includes God's work with Joseph, Daniel, and Nehemiah to name a few. As we move into the New Testament we recognize that Jesus' incarnation is a model that teaches us about being migrants or in diaspora. This carries through in the NT where being sent is the expectation of the Gospels and adhering to the gospel in the book of Acts resulted in persecution that became an impetus for the church to go (Wan & Tira, 2009, pp. 34-35). This was evidenced by Paul, Peter, and others such as Priscilla and Aquila. As we seek to grasp this dynamic of diaspora we are lead to a deeper understanding of God's missionary nature and the *missio dei*. It is clear that the migrant is not alone, but is accompanied by “a migrant God who wanders through the wilderness with his people. This is the same God who experiences exile, social marginalisation, and a sense of rootlessness in and through the incarnate life of Jesus” (Jackson 2011, p. 21-22).

That Jesus identifies with the migrant is clearly evident in the Gospels. Donald Senior sums it up well:

the Gospels portray the adult Jesus as an itinerant, one who has nowhere to lay his head (Lk 9:58), who leaves behind family and lands and possessions (Mk 10:28-31), whose entire ministry is characterized in the synoptic Gospels as a journey to a homeland beyond Jerusalem (Lk 9:51). (Senior, 2008, p. 23)

Basing the understanding of our identity as Christians on this continual biblical emphasis of non-permanence and especially the life of Jesus, cements the reality that as Christians we always live in exile and are to have a longing for our true and heavenly home (Senior, 2008, p. 28), which is the theme of Hebrews 11:13-16.

Being in diaspora is thus not a disadvantage but can be seen as part of the way God is at work. In other words, the “migrant experience is a way of understanding our humanity as God intends it to be understood. It is central to the experience of God incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth as the prototype of a new humanity” (Jackson 2011, p. 15). The diaspora is something that we can embrace in missions because it has always been a part of God’s efforts and plan in blessing the nations.

The impact of the pilgrim mentality in the New Testament as having a particular benefit in developing our spiritual identity can be supported by cross cultural literature. Experiencing cultural differences and developing “cultural empathy also raises questions about what’s important to us” (Shaules, 2010, p. 80). The impact of being a sojourner allows us to question our identity and challenges us to “define, demark, or defend our own sense of personal and cultural territory. We must develop a sense of where we belong, the values we want to live by, the kind of person we want to be, how we want to communicate, and so on” (Shaules, 2010, p. 81). As Paul proclaims to the Ephesians “Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household” (Ephesians 2:19). The identity we ultimately attain as Christians is not tied to any one culture but God’s kingdom. This kingdom identity is vital as we continue to explore “Doing Missions as Participants in Diaspora”.

The Diaspora from a missional perspective

Understanding the particularities of what is happening in today’s world that we are labeling as “diaspora” is important to connect this phenomenon to missions. Without going into extensive demographic details—as they are widely written about—it is commonly held that about 3%, or 214 million of the world’s population is “outside their country of origin” (UNFPA), that is about 1 in 33 people.

Specifically the diaspora community has been defined as those who “(1) have migrated from a homeland and settled in a new place, (2) have taken the time and trouble to form a separate community there, and (3) still maintain connections with the homeland” (Rynkiewicz, 2011, p. 207). The nature of the current participants in diaspora is also important to our discussion.

Compared to the time period prior to 1960 when migration was from the developed nations to the rest of the world, migration today “has been predominantly from areas with weak economic and political systems to the centers of global dominance and advanced industrial growth” (Hanciles, 2008a, p. 172). Also while the migration prior to 1960 was often tied to empire building the south to west migration of today is strongly tied to social networks that connects home to the destination through remittances and continuing migrations (Hanciles, 2008a, p. 201). At the same time, while Western societies have become increasingly secular and tolerant, the Non-Western societies of today’s migrants “retain strong allegiance to religious systems and traditional values” (Hanciles, 2008b, p. 125).

Furthermore, it is widely recognized that migration is tied to religious strength. Not only are many who migrate already religiously strong, but many migrants become more religious due to the process of being uprooted and seeking out an identity that is tied to a community (George, 2011, p. 48).

As this is examined in light of missions it becomes evident that the countries that were once the center of the Christian faith but are becoming increasingly secular, are often on the receiving end of migration from what is “now the main heartlands of the Christian faith, giving rise to a massive non-Western missionary movement” (George, 2011, p. 49). Another dynamic that is important for our understanding is the recognition that many of the Christian migrants are

“more attune to religious plurality than their Western counterparts. This enhances their missionary capacity to maintain effective Christian witness in the face of religious pluralism” (Kim 2011, 64). This can be a significant contribution to their potential ministry in the West where the church is still learning to deal with pluralism. All of these factors set the stage not only for mission among the diaspora but by the diaspora.

Diaspora, Marginality, and building a kingdom identity

In order to bring together the concept of kingdom identity building and a missional perspective of the diaspora a deeper look into the kingdom identity building process is needed. A significant part of building identity from the pilgrimage perspective depends on how one makes adjustments to being in a second culture and much one is open to the transformative process of being in pilgrimage.

To get at the idea of identity building in the diaspora community it is vital to look at what happens to a person in diaspora. Understanding the process begins with recognizing that participants in diaspora are “neither at home nor fully abroad” (Rynkiewich, 2011, p. 208). This state of being in-between has been labeled as marginality (Shaules, 2010, p. 81), or liminality (Adeney, 2011). Whether this is a positive or a negative depends on how it is handled.

This cultural adjustment stage is negative when the person “is buffeted by conflicting cultural loyalties and unable to construct a unified identity” (Bennett, 1993, p. 113). This dynamic is marked by the lack of a sense of belonging and unstable perspectives (Bennett, 1993, p. 114-115). On the other hand this becomes a positive stage when the person interacts positively with the context and uses the situation to construct a new identity in the midst of two cultures (Bennett, 1993, p. 113). An outcome that is beneficial for the Christian in mission is

that the person who deals with this positively “feels authentic and recognizes that one is never *not* at home in the world” (Bennett, 1993, p. 118).

It is important to recognize what one is dealing with when in diaspora. How does one maintain identity with the past, present, and future at the same time? It is not unlike Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles in Babylon telling them to settle in and get on with life (Jeremiah 29). One key to this stage is the sense of disorientation sense of ambiguity from being physically and culturally dislocated and the loss of cultural or social identity. Yet, the goal of identity formation is to come out “more stable and centered than ever before” (Weaver, 1993, p. 139).

To build a new identity the individual must learn to deal with the ambiguity, learn to respect differences and clearly develop his or her self-understanding. While the secular context points the person in this process to a form of cultural relativism stating that this stage “requires the person to make a commitment to a value system honed from many contexts and an identity actively affirmed and based solidly on self as choice maker” (Bennett, 1993, p. 119), as Christians it is an opportunity to recognize that we can build our identity solidly on our relationship with God as members of his kingdom.

It is important to recognize that this stage of identity loss is normal and can lead to growth (Weaver, 1993, p. 139). This is true because as we interact with another culture this “transitional period is very associative or relational in that everything seems to flow together somewhat chaotically. But this is how we begin to see new relationships and new ways of ordering our perceptual and intellectual world” (Weaver, 1993, p. 145). Furthermore, as “with any other identity crisis, culture shock allows us to give up an inadequate perceptual and problem-solving system to allow another more expanded and adequate system to be born. It is somewhat of a death-rebirth cycle” (Weaver, 1993, p. 145).

While the discussion of cultural adjustment tends to focus on the individual, there are aspects to consider for the larger diaspora community as well. When an individual is adapting to a second or host culture, it is largely an independent or isolated process. This is more complicated when a whole community is in the process of finding itself. “The very fact of the existence of a diaspora community means that its members do not intend to assimilate and disappear into the dominant society. That does not mean that they oppose the society of the host country, or that they unequivocally support the society of the home country” (Rynkiewich, 2011, p. 211).

This places the whole community into a similar marginal or liminal state as the individual faces. Since they are away from their original context and facing a new setting this dislocation “becomes a seedbed for fresh critical reflection on some of the assumptions upon which we build our lives, like identity, community, faith, purpose, meaning, family, and destiny” (George, 2011, p. 53).

This marginality allows for one to intentionally not belong to any one culture so as to function in both. The loss of identity should be compensated with a strong adherence to the pilgrim reality of the Christian on earth. This marginal state has also been labeled as cultural dissonance which can lead to spiritual disorientation which can in turn be welcomed as an “opportunity for the Holy Spirit to lead ... from deep cultural stress to a new plateau of spiritual maturity” (Fendall, p. 75).

Returning to the biblical account of Abraham and his migrant status enables us to see the spiritual benefits that can be gained from marginality. The cultural distance that Abraham achieved by leaving his homeland allowed him to focus on God. In the end “Abraham’s allegiance to Yahweh was greater than his allegiance to his home culture; in moving away, he

necessarily became a stranger to his own kin in order to strengthen his identity as God's person" (Morgan, p. 35). This is an outcome that we all need to achieve as Christians.

This outcome is not, however, automatically accomplished by the transition process of migration or entering diaspora. "To find one's identity in God, then, two movements are needed—presence and purpose. First, one must leave home efficaciously, practicing the quality of presence in new contexts, and second, in purposeful movement toward something or Someone" (Morgan, p. 38). The underlying question then is how to make this process into a constructive time of building one's identity in God and being able to use this as a base point for ministry.

Intentionality is essential to this process. Achieving a good state of identity requires knowledge about culture beliefs and values, and positive attitudes towards both cultures (Econompoulos, 1999, p. 12). It has been suggested that this experience can be beneficial especially once the individual realizes the "ability to develop and maintain competence in both cultures" (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993, p. 402). This is fostered through a solid self-concept based on individuation, which sees oneself apart from others, but is not the same as a strong individualism which can be self-centered (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993, p. 402). As Christians, I believe that the strength of a self-concept that can enable us to benefit the most from this process comes from our identity in Christ. It is Paul being able to recognize that he can "become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (I Corinthians 9:22b) because his primary identity was in Christ, not being Jewish or becoming a Gentile.

Another way to look at this identity building relates to the process of moving through life transitions. Whenever we face significant changes, we go through "the natural process of

disorientation and reorientation marking the turning points in the path of growth” (Bridges, 2004, p. 4). Before we arrive at a new beginning we face the neutral zone. During this stage one is able to find what really matters and listen to reality (Bridges, 2004, p. 133ff). This could be likened to the Israelites in the exodus or Jesus in the wilderness. This “neutral zone is a time ... when an inner reorientation and realignment are occurring, a time when we are making the all-but imperceptible shift from one season of life to the next” (Bridges, 2004, p. 154). It is time for renewal and identifying self with a new beginning (Bridges, 2004, p.169).

It seems to me that achieving a third identity, the Christian identity, in Christ will enable us to deal with the tensions inherent in our earthly identity or identities. Research suggests that “being a ‘marginal person’ is disconcerting only if the individual internalizes the conflict between the two cultures in which he or she is living” (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993, p. 395). Internally, a strong identity is seen as helping with coping (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993, p. 403). An additional factor in adjustment is the strength of social networks in both cultures (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993, p. 407). Having a strong connection to the church establishes a social network that stabilizes the person in the state of marginality. Using these aspects of successful cultural adjustment can be a significant part of building our identity in Christ and the church.

While it is recognized that this can be a stressful process it can strengthen us (Adeney, 2011, p. 6). It can prepare one for ministry whether from the diaspora community or as a missionary within a diaspora community. The experience of growing and developing a kingdom identity can be helpful in facilitating others in their move towards becoming Christians which is the formation of a new identity and includes a spiritual leaving of culture.

Diaspora community as cross-cultural missionary

Given that God sends all of the church (John 20:21, Acts 1:8) and the subsequent reality of the missional nature of the church, it is not a question of whether or not the Christian diaspora community should be involved in mission, but a question of “how?” Enoch Wan has described missions from the diaspora as being either “**Missions through the diaspora**” which is reaching out through social networks or “**Missions by and beyond the Diaspora**” which is “cross-cultural missions to other ethnic groups in their host countries, homelands, and abroad” (2011b, p. 5). Another dimension of the missionary role of the diaspora community is described as reverse missions “when non-Western churches return with the Gospel to societies that initially brought the Gospel to them” (Kim 2011, 63).

A key factor in the feasibility of the diaspora community’s involvement in missions is that they are from areas of the global church that are experiencing new spiritual life and vibrant faith. Many of these Christians are evangelistic and have a strong focus on conversion. A plus for their ministry in the West is that they are already accustomed to ministry in pluralistic settings. Furthermore, when they find themselves going to the West many “see themselves as ‘missionaries’ as their growth and witness serve as a stark contrast to declining Western churches” (Kim 2011, 63).

The objective is to discover how to help foster this sense of missions and how the diaspora experience contributes to this calling. The diaspora community needs to be lead in learning “how it can best integrate the migrant experiences of vibrant and vital faith with its own experiences” (Jackson 2011, p. 24). The diaspora church needs to take Acts 8:4 and 11:26 as motivating passages. Just as the early church took off in the Gentile world through those who were dispersed by persecution, today’s Christian diaspora can “become conduits through which

missionary passion and influence flow between new and old heartlands of Christianity and create new frontiers for cross-cultural diffusion of the faith” (George, 2011, p. 52-53).

Perhaps the first phase of mission is to focus on reaching out within social networks. As the diaspora community embraces the marginality discussed above it is positioned to best reach out to others who are going through the stress of adjustment. Since they are in the same experience they can readily understand the difficulties of leaving and adjusting that other migrants are dealing with (Rodríguez, 2008, p. xii). As Christian migrants are forming a new cultural identity, they can position themselves to assist other migrants in finding their new identity in Christ. Just as Paul describes putting on the new self (Ephesians 4:20-24) the Christian migrant can correlate their experience to the spiritual journey to aid the new believer in becoming like Christ.

It is important for the diaspora church to be aware of the process of adjustment as during the transition time migrants are open to changes in belief “by experiences, information and new relations” (Boekstijn, 1988, p. 88). Since the adjustment process, while the migrant is in the marginal state, has been shown to be a time when migrants are open to conversion, the actual act of spiritual conversion can be correlated to the migration process and the changes in identity from changing cultures. This includes both leaving and moving towards the new country (Akcapar, 2006, p. 844). Others have indicated that the new interpersonal connections, new ties to the home culture through worship, and the religious nature of the transition experience are all factors in opening migrants to conversion (Chao, 2006, p. 196). Conversion in this context is facilitated by the support and social networks provided to migrants by the church community (Akcapar, 2006, pp. 836-841). Because personal relations are a key to migration success this is an opportunity for the church to reach their own (Boekstijn, 1988, p. 92).

A second phase is for the diaspora community to move to missions beyond their immediate community, by reaching out to other diaspora or migrant groups. This likewise builds from the importance of relationships. An additional population segment with which the diaspora church might have success is composed of those within a nation who are “disadvantaged and marginalized” (Hanciles, 2008a, p. 298). These may be peoples that the dominant culture doesn’t reach and with which the diaspora church may be able to identify. Each of these avenues for ministry requires the diaspora community to embrace their identity as exiles and aliens rather than leaving behind who they are. It is not to say that they should not assimilate or integrate, but rather recognize their affinity with God’s call to be pilgrims and participants in his kingdom. This new identity becomes primary.

Furthermore, the diaspora church can be involved in missions to the host culture. This may be the hardest, but can be very important. “First and foremost, the new immigrant congregations are performing a vital missionary function by their very presence” (Hanciles, 2008a, p. 297). This is possible due to the aforementioned vitality of faith. Just as Israel was called to be a light, so is the church (Matthew 5:14). The missionary function of migrant congregations can be effective because “immigrant churches model religious commitment, apply the message of the gospel directly to daily exigencies, and comprise communities that interact on a daily basis with other marginalized segments of society” (Hanciles, 2008a, p. 278).

Finally, the diaspora community can focus on cross-cultural witness. By embracing the attitude of pilgrim, diaspora Christians can recognize that what they have learning through adapting to a host culture is preparation for cross-cultural missions (Wan, 2011b, p. 139). One context in which migrants have an advantage in missions is in what we consider to be creative access countries. When Christian migrants establish their community in these settings they also

establish the church. This community, particularly through the assimilation of their children has the opportunity to reach out to the hosts (George, 2011, p. 52-53).

In summation the diaspora community has the opportunity to point to God's kingdom rather than either to their own or the host culture. While said of migrants in the US context the words of Miriam Adeney ring true for any context:

“All of us are called to live in the tension between the kingdom and culture. But Christians in North America's ethnic communities, much like Daniel, may master this balance better than those of us who have melted into the majority population. Not limited to one society, they may more clearly envision the kingdom that transcends all.” (Adeney, 2011, p. 6)

Cross-cultural missionary as Participant in Diaspora

The other side of missions and diaspora is what Wan identifies as “**Missions to the Diaspora**” which is to reach “the diaspora groups in forms of Evangelism or pre-evangelistic social services, then disciple them to become worshipping communities and congregations” (Wan, 2011b, p. 5). This is the role of the missionary to people who are experiencing diaspora.

Any mission ministry to the diaspora community has to begin with the recognition of the unique opportunity that ministry to people who are in transition, and thus are potentially receptive to the Gospel, provides (Wan 2011a, p. 6-7). The challenge is for cross-cultural missionaries to use their own adjustment process as an essential component of ministry. As adjustment and the resulting marginality is embraced and the missionary increases in “cross-cultural awareness and competency, the translatability of the gospel increases and diffusion of the faith from one culture to another occurs naturally” (George, 2011, p. 53).

Thus the challenge for the missionary who leaves his or her own culture to minister to those in diaspora is to be able to identify with the diaspora community through their own transition process. This identification can facilitate the missionary's ministry in several ways. Cultural adaptation can facilitate the missionary in setting aside much of their own culture that could hinder the Gospel message. As missionaries come to recognize their place between cultures they are better able to see how to contextualize the Gospel (Ott, 2011, p. 89). Secondly, by taking on the role of migrant and thus losing the power inherent in one's own—and particularly white western—culture, the missionary can better identify with the diaspora community (Adeney, 2011, p. 14).

By embracing the marginality of transition, the missionary is prepared to more fully identify with the example of Jesus Christ. While we cannot become incarnate as Jesus did, we can learn to emulate him as “he provides us with a way of understanding our role in bridging between worlds” (Hiebert, 2006, p. 299). Our goal is to assume the attitude of Jesus Christ in Philippians 2:5-11 by humbling ourselves and taking on the role of a servant.

This lack of belongingness or belonging to more than one world allows the missionary to embrace their identity in Christ above all else and be a mediator between worlds, (Hiebert, 2006, p. 300). This role as mediator requires missionaries to be

“bicultural or transcultural people who are able to live in different worlds and are not fully at home in any one of them. Transcultural mediators need to know both communities well and speak to each other. Being insiders, they build trust in each community. Being outsiders enables them to bridge the groups.” (Hiebert, 2006, p. 301).

From this perspective as participant in diaspora the missionary can best share the gospel from a common experience.

Conclusion:

It is the goal of this paper to point out the benefits found in “doing missions as participants in diaspora” for today’s context. All who do missions are faced with the challenge of embracing and never losing sight of the advantages of the pilgrim mentality for missions. Those in mission must keep in mind the continual thread throughout the Bible, that God’s people are aliens and strangers and that the biblical diaspora community always had a role in God’s mission to the world (Rynkiewich, 2011, p. 213). The bottom line is that as “subjects of God’s Kingdom, Christians have become citizens of heaven, but remain on earth as “pilgrims with a mission.” That is, to bear witness that the kingdoms of the world are temporary. But God’s kingdom is eternal.” (Wan & Tira, 2009, pp. 42). Embracing marginality can be a boon to missions and the church.

The benefits of embracing this reality of being a pilgrim are central to meaningful missions ministry. The person who has adjusted to another culture as a Christian has an advantage in missions over those who have not gone through the process. “Monocultural individuals face a greater challenge in this regard than do bicultural individuals who are at home with more than one culture and who have some experience traversing cultural gaps (Ott, 2011, p. 89). Whether it is the adjustment of the migrant or of the missionary, going through this transition can facilitate the work of missions first through a greater understanding of the conversion process and second will open the door to contextualization because ties to the home culture of the missionary are loosened. Is this not the benefit that Paul experienced from his own multi-cultural background (Acts 22:3)?

One additional benefit is that this potential of “doing missions as participants in diaspora” further supports the reality that the day of missions from a Western solo approach needs to

disappear. Learning to partner with the Christian diaspora (Wan 2011a, p. 11) and fostering this relationship can build mutuality and point those whom we are serving more clearly to God's kingdom.

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