

## **Culture Clash: The challenge of Ministering to Immigrants**



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### **Introduction**

Last week, a lady from Forest Park Church invited me to come to her house for a single ladies' get together. (This is because someone told her that I was complaining.) I gave it a thought, and decided to attend. I do not know who she is and she does not know who I am. I drove by her house to find the location, as I am not familiar with the area. She is a widow, her church is having a party for the married, and she decided to do something for the singles. She lives in a big mansion, and is retired. While visiting with her, she talked about the party and asked me to bring 2 bottles of soft drink. I wonder if these people ever give a glass of water to any one free. If you are invited to an American's home, you had better take something otherwise do not eat or drink. This bugs me to death and I am wondering whether I should even go.<sup>1</sup>

This is an extract from the story of Vaster, an immigrant to the United States from Asia. She came into American society with high hopes and great expectation from the "dream land, the land of opportunities."<sup>2</sup> However, she has been frustrated, angry,

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<sup>1</sup>The names and the actual places mentioned in this paper have been changed to protect the identity of all the parties involved. After collecting data, it becomes necessary to use pseudo names in view of the nature of materials and people involved. Some of the issues are very emotionally sensitive and may have legal implications that deserve protection.

embittered, and almost rejected the Christian faith because of her experiences with some American Christians. At the time of coming to America, she was married, pregnant and was ready for the American dream, or so she thought. But presently, she is a single mom, and has raised her daughter through college all alone. She accuses Christians of egocentrism and having unloving and uncaring attitudes. She partly blames them for her predicaments, including her divorce.

I met Vaster in September 2002 while on a missionary assignment. She was invited by a friend to where I was teaching. I had the honor of leading her to faith in Christ and since then, it has been a great experience learning from her, listening to her, watching her struggle, complain, and confront challenges in joyous occasions and not-so joyous situations. I was privileged to host Vaster and her daughter Gold for sometime in my house and had visited her on a number of occasions. We are constantly in touch as I continue to observe her life, try to understand the issues she is dealing with, and learn some important missiological lessons from her life.

The purpose of this article is to explore the life story of Vaster as a case study from the anthropological, and missiological view points with the underlying motive of determining if her case is a consequence of a culture clash; the failure of the Christian church in ministering to a needy woman; a psychological trauma of a failed relationship; or all of the above or even none of the above. The thesis of the article is that a good percentage of first generation non-Westerners from Asia, Africa, and South America that

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<sup>2</sup>The United States is considered rightly or wrongly as a land of great opportunities, where no matter your background and social standing, you can be successful. Furthermore, because of the economic, political, and military strength, coupled with the national emphasis on personal freedom, liberty and promise of equalitarian society, it is seen as the beacon of hope, and land of freedom and opportunities. Right from the discovery days of Christopher Columbus, millions of people had migrated to it in search of her opportunities and freedom.

migrate to the United States do not generally and completely acculturate into the main stream American culture. Reflecting from the life story of Vaster, immigrants like her would need special attention and ministry. For such an effective ministry to take place, it would be necessary for the Christians to understand the immigrants' worldview and background so that they can be successfully reached with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The methodology employed in this study includes: letting Vaster tell her own story through conversations on telephone, recollections of her life experiences, responses to e-mail questions, as well as my general observations. Hopefully this will provide information about her unique background as a way of understanding her problems culturally. In examining her life story, I will seek to apply lessons learned missiologically.

### **Background of Vaster**

There are conflicting dates on the birthday of Vaster. The official birth certificate states June 6, 1950, while the church record dates April 10, 1951. However, Vaster claims that she was informed that none of the dates is correct. She jokes with this ambiguity and says, "I do not know when I was born. Praise God, I can stay young at all times because I have no birthday to celebrate."<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, she is certain, that she was born between 1950 and 1951 in a South Asian country.

Vaster is the third child of her parents in the family of six, three boys and three girls. The parents of Vaster lived in a village house where the roof was made of leaves and the floor was simply dirt. The father, Mr. Tousha, owned a small business in the

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<sup>3</sup>Vaster, "Letter to dtuche." March 16, 2005. 1.

village, the only grocery store in that community. The grocery store served the community both as a retail store as well as socialization joint. Mr. Tousha stayed in the store from sunrise until about 10.00pm. The store was his life as he sought to provide for his family.

The mother of Vaster, Niaka, was always depressed. She had the responsibility of raising the children as the husband was busy at the store. However, her depression was because of an experience with a snake and her first child. Vaster recalls the experience the mother had when her first child died due to snake poisoning. She witnessed a snake bite her five-year-old daughter, and later, the child died in her arms. She was the first and only child then. She never recovered from the pain as she blamed herself for the death of her child. Consequently, she distanced herself from other children and was never close to them.<sup>4</sup>

Growing up was difficult for Vaster, as the family battled with poverty and survival. The children all worked in the field, took care of the animals, and somehow survived. Vaster recounts, “We never ate a dinner together, talked together as a family, or went anywhere as a family. In those days, people worried about what they could feed their children. We ate weeds, roots, plants, and fruits from trees to survive. There was no healthy food; I saw a lot of poverty, death of starving neighbors, a man selling his wife and young daughter to survive.”<sup>5</sup> Vaster loved her father, and has great memories of him. His greatest concern was to feed the family and provide the necessities of life. However, it was still a daunting challenge. Vaster states, “My dad made sure we had something to

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<sup>4</sup>Vaster, “letter to dtuche.” February 7, 2005. 2.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

eat everyday. He sacrificed so much to send me to high school. My older brother had to stay home to take care of other things. My sister could not go to school, as she had to be a mom. My youngest three siblings could not finish high school for various reasons.”<sup>6</sup>

The brother of Vaster had an arranged marriage at the age of sixteen. The parents and neighbors had to beat him in order to force him to marry. One of Vaster’s sisters married a man who beats her every day because she did not pay him dowry. It was in this situation that Vaster finished high school and moved in to live with the sister. The reason was to look for a job in order to support the family. It was difficult getting a steady job. The situation was so desperate that Vaster confesses, “I looked for work everywhere, men used me and threw me out, I had no self esteem, and could not understand why I have to suffer so much with my family.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Marriage and Coming to United States**

Vaster lived with her sister for 13 years. The sister and her husband Kashi had two children and Vaster was taking care of them. They all lived in one room, and the whole family was struggling for survival. However, the most difficult aspect of her stay was the abuse and molestation by Kashi. Vaster recounts, “my sister’s husband destroyed me, taking away my dignity and decency. If ever I resist his advances, he would beat up my sister or would threaten to kill her. To keep my sister alive, I did what he wanted, however, he will still beat her, and when I refuse him, he would beat me too.”<sup>8</sup> This experience continued until one day that the sister of Vaster caught her and the husband on

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Vaster, “letter to dtuche.” January 25, 2005. 1-2.

bed. “I lived like that for 13 years, and one day my sister caught him in bed and tried to kill herself.”<sup>9</sup> The sister asked Vaster to leave the house. With no food, no job, no house, Vaster narrates how she survived.

I left the house and lived from one place to another, and the dream of getting a job and providing for my family kept me alive. At the same time I lost my dad, I could not visit him for lack of fund. To lessen my younger brother’s burden, I had no other choice but to sell myself. The only way I could have a job was to satisfy any man that gives me something, and whenever another young girl comes, the man throws me out. After some time, I went back to my sister and whenever I get something, I helped her financially. This was my life for 13 years.<sup>10</sup>

It was in this context that Tuba came from the United States to look for a bride. Mr. Tuba lost his dad at the age of two in World War II. His mother and stepfather raised him up and sent him to a boarding school. From high school, he went to the university for his higher education. As he was finishing, his uncle arranged marriage for him at the age of 22. He was a perfect in-law to the family of his wife, and they worshiped him. He had three children, and decided to move to United States for further studies. When he finished his graduate work, his family joined him. However, for some reasons, he could no longer get along with his wife, and she moved out. The wife left him, the children grew up and left the house, and he was advised to travel back to his home country for another wife. It was in this journey that Tuba met Vaster.<sup>11</sup>

Vaster was among the fifteen girls that Tuba met in his scout for a new bride. Vaster says, “I did not tell him about my past, but he knew I was not a virgin. He had many girl friends, and I thought we were a perfect match and that we should forget the

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 2.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Vaster, “letter to dtuche.” February 7, 2005. 3.

past and have a new beginning.”<sup>12</sup> Vaster was eventually chosen as the new bride partly because she finished high school. Having settled for Vaster, they had a civil marriage in the court without the family of Vaster paying for her bride price. The new couple stayed together for a month and Tuba returned to United States. Vaster became pregnant within that month and joined the husband in her 5<sup>th</sup> month of pregnancy.<sup>13</sup>

### **Life in America**

Vaster was excited with the prospect of living in United States of America with the promise of participating in her dreams and prosperity. Recollecting her feelings, Vaster says, “Like any other person who comes to this country, my dream was for a better life than the life I was used to. More than anything else, I wanted to help my family. I saw their suffering and experienced it personally, I wanted to help alleviate their suffering and give them hope.”<sup>14</sup> However, life in America was quite different from what Vaster had envisaged. At home, there were many problems with the husband and his family. According to her, “They harassed me constantly for not bringing and paying the traditional dowry.”<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Vaster states, “He was not the man I thought him to be. I thought love can conquer anything, therefore, I worshiped him, let him use me like a slave. I cooked and packed his breakfast and lunch everyday before he goes to work, and on weekends, served his breakfast on bed.”<sup>16</sup> However, the situation began to degenerate

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<sup>12</sup>Vaster, , “letter to dtuche.” January 25, 2005. 2.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Vaster, “letter to dtuche.” January 27, 2005. 1.

<sup>15</sup>Vaster, “Letter to dtuche.” February 7, 2005. 3.

<sup>16</sup>Vaster, “letter to dtuche.” January 27, 2005. 1.

as Tuba started drinking, became abusive to both Vaster and their little baby girl named Gold.

This situation led Vaster to visit various churches, seeking help and intervention to save her marriage. The family crisis affected little Gold in school so much that sometimes she vomited in class, which attracted the attention of the social workers who visited their home and advised that Vaster separate from the husband or lose their daughter to the state. Vaster remembers, “During this time, I was attending a Bible study class in a church. I told them that I was separating from my husband, cried out my lungs. I waited at home for a single phone call from at least one person, but nobody called. We separated for two months, with the hope that things could change, but after the two months of waiting, nothing changed, we divorced after ten years of marriage.”<sup>17</sup> The husband decided to relocate to their home country, remarried and raised a new family while Vaster and Gold remained in America searching for the American dream. In the process, she encountered cultural shock, clashes, and challenges, but she survived and today, the conflict is still raging, as Gold has graduated from college and said to Vaster, “leave me alone, I am now an adult and can make my decisions.” Here are some cultural themes from the life of Vaster as she interacts with American Christians, and tried to raise Gold as a single mother in United States of America.

### **Cultural Themes**

#### **Sense of Community**

As Vaster was facing family crisis and challenges, she turned to the churches with the hope that through their ministry, love and concern, she would receive respite,

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid. Some of the information are supplemented by telephone interviews and conversations.



and possible reconciliation with the husband but she encountered church members who seemed distant, uninterested, and afraid to get involved in what many considered private issues. For instance, during the ordeal of separation from the husband and the difficulties Gold was experiencing in school, Vaster writes, “all alone with a sick child, who wished I was dead so that she could die on my side, I wished God could take her so that I could end my life too. We waited and desired for somebody to talk to and share my burden with, but there was none, no one to give an encouraging word either to me or to my daughter from the school to the church.”<sup>18</sup> Further more, Vaster asserts, “With my 20 years experience in America, Christians are the most thoughtless, uncaring, unloving people I ever met. I have many non-Christians, who know my needs and offered help without me asking first. All that I wanted was a word of compliment for my child, but I did not get it.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Sense of Privacy, Space, and Time**

Vaster recounts numerous instances she desired help, time, or service from Christians of her church but was not assisted. She says, “When my internet was not working, I requested that a guy in the church come have a look at it, his response was that I will pay \$40 .00. This is my biggest shock; I was born and raised dirt poor, but had sent more than \$30, 000. 00 to relatives, for nephews’ and nieces’ education, but I am surprised that here you can not render a simple help to a poor woman.”<sup>20</sup> Vaster continues, “A child who lives away from the parents cannot visit the parents without

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 4-5.

permission. I heard a famous judge say, ‘her grown up children came visiting without calling her first, that she did not open door for them because they did not respect her privacy.’”<sup>21</sup> Again, she asserts, “These people cannot have a two minute conversation with another human being. Marcus, who attends the church with me and works in the same office for six years never said more than hello.”<sup>22</sup>

### **Expectations**

Vaster regrets and laments the seemingly lack of concern from the Christians she associated with. Her expectation was that the Christians would be there for her, share in her joys and sorrows and do things without being asked to or being paid first. It was frustrating for her, as she compares her background with the American society. She declares, “Divorce, single mother, and baby sitter, were all new words I heard for the first time after coming here. No neighbors ever did anything without charging money. I was surprised to notice that some people placed garbage bag of an elderly neighbor in the driveway and charge 50 cents for 30 seconds of work. To tell you the truth, I was in complete shock with those experiences.”<sup>23</sup> To underscore her expectation from the body of Christians, she reiterates, “I did not have any one from another country other than people in the church. One particular church pastor after listening to me said, ‘why are you making such a big deal, there are so many single mothers out there.’ Another one said, count your blessings for coming to America.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Vaster, “Letter to dtuche.” January 22, 2005.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 2. Marcus is a member of the church Vaster was attending at this particular time.

<sup>23</sup>Vaster, “Letter to dtuche.” January 22, 2005. 1.

Vaster narrates that she comes from a country where 85 percent of the population are non-Christians, but according to her, everyone cares, loves, and participates in the affairs of others, but in America, “A pastor’s daughter I work with told me that ‘love one another’ means respecting each other’s beliefs and customs. People seem to have no clue of what love means. Hindus come and they do things for you without you asking. So I did not get it when Christians say Jesus paid the price, therefore, they can not help others.”<sup>25</sup> In a letter to her former pastor, Vaster writes, “I told 500 Christians to talk to a lonely child, but no one cared, since you preach Jesus paid the price, I am not going to church either. He paid for that too, according to your preaching.”<sup>26</sup> In the same mail, Vaster compares the attitude of the pastor with an old Asian lady who serves in the hospital where she was admitted for nervous breakdown. She notes that in the hospital, there was a nursing aid, about 60 years old from Asia who told all the patients to call her grandma and insists that they are all her children. This old woman according to Vaster mentioned to her that many are depressed and suicidal because of isolated life. The old Asian aid’s statement is taken by Vaster as a confirmation of her experience in America.

### **Beyond the Complaints: Understanding the conflicting Worldviews**

Paul Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou argue, “The highest levels of abstraction and belief systems are reflected in worldviews. Worldviews are the most

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>25</sup>Vaster, “Letter to dtuche” January 26, 2005. 1.

<sup>26</sup>Vaster, “Letter to Marcus” December 4, 2004. 2.

encompassing frameworks of thought that relate belief systems to one another.”<sup>27</sup>

According to the scholars, worldview assumptions are taken for granted, “They are largely unexamined and implicit. They are reinforced by the deepest of feelings, and anyone who challenges them challenges the very foundations of people’s lives.”<sup>28</sup> Glen Fisher considers culture as a “pretested design, a store of knowledge and an entire system of coping skills that has been crafted by humans who have gone before, a design that has been socially created, tested and shared and one that can be transmitted to the child. It is this design, which persists even as individuals come and go.”<sup>29</sup> Fisher concludes that culture makes all the difference in actions and reactions for humans.

Therefore, Gert Jan Hofstede, Paul B. Pedersen, and Geert Hofstede in the book, *Exploring Culture: Exercises, Stories and Synthetic Cultures* insist that the “core of intercultural awareness is learning to separate observation from interpretation.”<sup>30</sup> What they mean is that it is necessary to remember actions, behaviors, and responses of people when confronted with a second culture, but suspend attribution of meaning or judgment until you know enough of the culture. It will be necessary therefore to understand the cultural worldview of Vaster, in the light of the dominant North American culture and her reaction to issues and problems.

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<sup>27</sup>Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response To Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 40.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Glen Fisher, *Mindsets: The role of Culture and Perception in International Relations* (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1988), 45.

<sup>30</sup>Gert Jan Hofstede, Paul B. Pedersen, and Geert Hofstede, *Exploring Culture: Exercises, Stories and Synthetic Cultures* (Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 2002), 17.

Vaster before migrating to the United States is from extreme collectivistic culture in contrast to extreme individualistic culture of the Americans. Reflecting on her story from the perspective of synthetic culture profile, her core value will be group harmony, and the core distinction will be ingroup and outgroup. Here are the seven key elements in her cultural worldview;

1. Members of one's ingroup (organization, extended family) are very close, whereas other, outgroup people are very distant.
2. Harmony should be maintained and direct confrontation avoided.
3. Relationships are more important than the task at hand. Much time is spent on greeting and farewell rituals.
4. Laws, rights, and opinions differ by group.
5. Trespassing leads to shame and loss of face for the entire ingroup.
6. The relationship between employer and employee is perceived in moral terms, like a family link.
7. Spoken communication uses imprecise style. Discreet non-verbal clues, such tone and pauses, are crucial. The speaker adapts to the listener.<sup>31</sup>

On the contrary, the extreme individualism has as its core value, individual freedom, and its core distinction is "me versus others." In this culture as represented in the United States is highly individualist. Here are the seven key elements according synthetic culture.

1. Honest people speak their mind.
2. Low-context communication (explicit concepts) is preferred.
3. The task takes precedence over relationships.
4. Laws and rights are the same for all.
5. Trespassing leads to guilt and loss of self-respect.
6. Everyone is supposed to have a personal opinion on any topic.
7. The relationship between employer and employee or between parent and child is a contract based on mutual advantage.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 96.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 94.

Paul G. Hiebert in *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, classifies the Western worldview as mechanical, and the Indian culture, similar to that of Vaster as organic in nature. According to Hiebert, “mechanical analogy –sees things as inanimate objects that act upon one another like parts in a machine.”<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, “organic analogy –sees things as living beings in relationship to each other.”<sup>34</sup> The truism of the cultural responses and coping mechanism can be seen in the life of Vaster. First, in relationship to Kashi, the husband of her sister; in spite of the repeated abuse she suffered, she refused to disclose the abuse until the sister caught her husband with her. The same value accounts for her remaining loyal to her abusive husband until they were forced to separate and divorce by the social workers. She values relationships; it was a shame to divorce even in an abusive relationship. She confesses that she never heard of the word before coming to the United States.

Vaster’s reaction to the apparent indifference from the church to her plight can also be seen from her worldview. She is from a communal culture; this culture, unlike the American culture, is community based. They share and help each other without expecting reward. She expected the Christians at least to show concern and share in her suffering, but for the American Christians, her problems are personal problems that need no outside involvement. It will be violating her privacy. She recounts how a Sikh young man gave her a ride of almost 300 miles without asking for money while a visit to her home from a churchman would cost her forty dollars. Another Asian lady lent her \$2,000 dollars

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<sup>33</sup>Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 195.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 194.

without even asking when the money would be paid back, while Christians in her church will not even give her a call.<sup>35</sup>

From her culture, life is to be shared; relationships are tighter and have an element of moral bidding, unlike the American culture, where relationships are contract based. Individuals guard their liberty and freedom, and privacy is highly valued. She comes from event oriented culture, which demands that “an activity be completed regardless of the length of time required, and emphasizes unscheduled participation rather than carefully structured activities.”<sup>36</sup> On the contrary, Mayers suggests that Americans are time oriented. “People who are time oriented express great concern about punctuality, the length of time expended, and utilization of time to its maximum potentials.”<sup>37</sup> This may in part account for the reluctance on the part of the pastors in giving her time or listening to her. A pastor’s wife said to her, “I hate women who come to church to give their problems to the church. They should give it to God.” Vaster comments, “I thought she might have seen me crying or something, so I left the church.”<sup>38</sup>

In Vaster’s story, there is always concern for politeness in the manner that people are treated, answered, and complimented. She says, “I always compliment people. I always find something nice to compliment.”<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, all the examples of people that have been helpful to her appear to be people of the same cultural background or similar cultural worldview. For instance, she refers to the Hispanic young man, as the one

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<sup>35</sup>Vaster, “Letter to dtuche.” February 7, 2005. 1.

<sup>36</sup>39.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 38-9.

<sup>38</sup>Vaster, “Letter to dtuche A.” January 22, 2005. 2.

<sup>39</sup>Vaster, “Letter to dtuche B.” January 22, 2005. 1.

who treats her like she is his mother. The caring Asian nursing aid in the hospital, the Japanese doctor, and the Hindus and Sikhs all have one commonality; non-Western culture which is more people oriented, and seemingly appreciates and shows more concern for people. She expected much, but received less because of the difference in culture. To the American mindset, she was taking much of their time. She needs to stand and take up her responsibilities, instead of whining and demanding too much attention.

The story of Vaster is an interesting story that deserves careful missiological consideration. Whatever interpretation the story is given, it represents a case of an immigrant seeking help and acceptance from Christians. Here are a few missiological implications for the church and her ministry in the multicultural, contemporary, American society.

### **Missiological Implications**

#### **Rite of Passage**

Rites of passage speak of transitional periods of evolving from one position to another. Paul G. Hiebert notes “Most societies have rituals making the transition of an individual or a group of individuals from one important status to another.”<sup>40</sup> Robert R. McCrae observes that there are four strategies for psychological acculturation, namely, integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. According to him, “Characteristics of both individual immigrants and host culture might affect the strategy chosen.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Paul G. Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 160.



If this observation is correct, it follows that the church has to seek out new immigrants like Vaster and reorient her on the new culture. She needs to know the behaviors, expectations, and socio-cultural differences that exist between her culture and the host culture. It is obvious that Vaster was never prepared for life in America. She had already gone through much stress; abuse, difficulties, and the cultural shock seem to have compounded issues for her. John W. Berry argues, “Gender has variable influence on the acculturation process. There is substantial evidence that females may be more at risk for problems than males. However, this generalization probably itself depends on the relative status and differential treatment of females in the two cultures.”<sup>42</sup> In Vaster’s case, there is a clear role of women from men in her culture. While in the American society, women are more at liberty and they engage in most of the activities that traditional cultures will assign exclusively to men. Vaster had to learn in a difficult way to do things all alone. Therefore, the church seeking to reach out for the new immigrants as a matter of necessity have to plan for a rite of passage for the new migrants coming from different cultures that will help initiate them into the host culture and create a rapport that may lead to sharing the gospel with the new immigrants.

### **Incarnational Ministry**

The story of Vaster can also be viewed in other ways; a psychological case study of an abused woman, a sociological problem of poverty, or a case of a marginalized woman. From whatever perspective the study is oriented, it is clear from her perception

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<sup>41</sup>Robert R. McCrae “Personality and Culture Revisited: Linking Traits and Dimensions of Culture” *Geert Hofstede Institute For Research on Intercultural Cooperation*, Tilburg, the Netherlands. 81. See also, *Cross-Cultural Research*, Vol. 38 No.1, (February 2004) 52-88.

<sup>42</sup>John W. Berry, “Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation” *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, vol. 47. No. 1, (1997), 22.

that Christians were uncaring, unloving, and insensitive to the needs of a poor immigrant woman. Sometimes, there is the feeling that she was not needed in the church.

Missiologically, to reverse the notion that the church is culturally insensitive, uncaring, and unloving, the church may institute holistic ministry towards the poor, the marginalized, and the immigrants like Vaster by identifying with them in their suffering, pain, and joy. What Janis Hutchinson writes about the ex-cultists can also be true of the new immigrants especially those fleeing from war, discrimination, abject poverty, persecution, and abuse. “Be patient and sympathetic. Listen and talk about the cult (home country, expectations, dreams, and experiences) in an understanding, nonjudgmental way.”<sup>43</sup> This may involve a cultural shift in relationships, privacy and time. It may involve the church being more incarnational in methodology and even in philosophy of ministry, being all things for all people.

### **Challenge of Homogeneous Unit Principle**

Donald A. McGavran, the father of the modern Church Growth Movement is noted for saying, “People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers.”<sup>44</sup> This socio-cultural observation is not only true of the non-Christians, but it is arguably true of the churches and their ministries. Most churches still feel uncomfortable when people of diverse cultures different from theirs join their church. It sometimes creates confusion, helplessness, resentment, and possible rejection. The case of Vaster demonstrates the truism of this problem. It is only very recently, that she is able

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<sup>43</sup>Janis Hutchinson, *Out of the Cults and Into the Church: Understanding & Encouraging Ex-Cultists* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Resources, 1994), 92.

<sup>44</sup>Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. C. Peter Wagner ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 163.

to join a church where she is fully accepted, loved, and cared for, after twenty years of sojourning in the United States. In fact, her new pastor is the only pastor to publicly give her a big hug, listen to her, and cry with her. It is not a cultural vacuum that the new pastor is from her culture. Her greatest complaint for these years has been getting a pastor to listen to her story. Charles H. Kraft notes, “Customs and cultural structuring show great persistence and a tendency to remain surprisingly the same over long periods of time.... Even though many things may be changed from generation to generation, many things remain pretty much the same.”<sup>45</sup>

This issue of being comfortable or having affinity may be addressed missiologically by either the church adjusting to be a multicultural church, which will involve a paradigm shift culturally, or churches may have to be planted with the vision of reaching out to different ethnic nationalities. However, this methodology may reinforce the existing stereotypes.

### **Ethnocentrism**

Geert Hofstede in his book, *Culture's Consequences* regards ethnocentrism as an “exaggerated tendency to think the characteristics of one’s own group or race superior to those of other groups or races.”<sup>46</sup> Hofstede insists that “cultural component in all kinds of behavior is difficult to grasp for people who have always remained embedded in the same cultural environment; it takes a prolonged stay abroad and mixing with other nationals there for us to recognize the numerous and often subtle differences”<sup>47</sup> in

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<sup>45</sup>Charles H. Kraft, *Anthropology For Christian Witness* (MaryKnoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 360-61.

<sup>46</sup>Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations Across Nations* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2001), 17.

behavior. Missionaries traveling abroad are often advised to be mindful of ethnocentrism. But the nature of the world today especially in the United States, as the melting point of different cultures demands that the church even at home should be mindful of ethnocentrism. As Andrew Atkins states, “We may think that we already understand our own culture, but usually we don’t until we enter another culture and then look back at our own.”<sup>48</sup> With the rise of globalization, the influx of immigrants from non-Western countries, and urbanization; every county, city, and neighborhood in the United States has become a mission field.

Therefore, missiologically, the home church today needs cross-cultural training for ministering to people like Vaster just like the old foreign missionaries. James and Lillian Breckenridge note that in the modern cosmopolitan urban centers,

The challenge facing the local church teacher is more complex than that faced by missionaries in more remote parts of the world. Rather than dealing with distinct races and cultures, contemporary church educators must communicate with many races and many cultures, all blended in a homogenous social fabric, which defies simple attempts of analysis or reduction.<sup>49</sup>

In order to be effective in reaching out to the lost within the immigrant communities from diverse backgrounds, the church will need to reduce or eliminate ethnocentrism and egocentrism and develop a greater awareness of the cultures of the immigrant world.

## **Counseling**

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>48</sup>Andrew Atkins “Know your Culture: A Neglected tool for Cross-cultural Ministry” *EMQ* July (1990), 226.

<sup>49</sup>James & Lillian Breckenridge, *What Color is Your God? Multicultural Education in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 17.

The life of Vaster is ridden with conflicts ranging from abuse in the family to the challenge of training up her only daughter. She was abused from childhood until adulthood. She confesses to lacking self-esteem and always desired to have people compliment her or her daughter. The church may need to engage the services of a professional counselor to help victims like Vaster recover from the effects of long abusive and oppressive relationships. People like Vaster need longer periods of counseling from a sympathetic, culturally sensitive counselor that will help her come out of her grief and anger. Some of her reactions and responses are indicative of frustration and excessive stress. John W. Berry notes, "If acculturation begins in later life (e.g. on retirement, or when older parents migrate to join their adult offspring under family reunification programs) there appears to be increased risk."<sup>50</sup> Vaster was already an adult when she joined her husband. With the problem of abuse, separation, and divorce from the husband, counseling will be necessary to help her fully recover from the painful past and face the future with assurance, love and hope in Christ Jesus.

### **Conclusion**

In exploring the life of Vaster, one is reminded of the millions of people who are migrating across national borders. As Christine D. Pohl states, it may be "in search for better life and economic opportunity, or to flee from war or toward religious freedom. Some move back and forth across borders regularly, with complex but tenuous bonds to both communities."<sup>51</sup> National governments may have different ways of classifying the

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<sup>50</sup>Berry, "Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation," 21.

<sup>51</sup>Christine D. Pohl, "Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration" *Missiology: An International Review*, Vol. XXXI, No. 1, January (2003), 1.

new immigrants, but cases like Vaster provide the church the missiological opportunities in reaching out for the lost and revitalization.

In order to realize this, the church must have a cultural shift in both identifying herself as a resident alien, and the practicing of the biblical hospitality to the new immigrants. It could be that God is allowing the new inflow for the reason of sharing the gospel. Touching and changing a life like Vaster's may result in a web of touching her remote community and the people in her home country.

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