

CHURCH PLANTING AND CURRENT DEMOGRAPHIC REALITIES IN NORTH AMERICA!

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In the following article I will highlight some of the current demographic and cultural changes in North America and argue that the changes pose missiological challenges more complex than any mission field in the world; and therefore, require a fresh look at our church planting methodology.

Introduction

To be able to plant churches that are biblically sound and culturally relevant in North America today there are factors that need to be considered. Apart from the biblical mandate of Jesus Christ and the missiological practices of the early church, it is important to understand modern North American cultural and demographic realities. This is critical to how churches are planted. Concerning cultural context, I am interested in where the culture is going. Often, discussions on culture focus on the past. There is a tendency to eulogize the past especially within the Christian community.

In the United States, the 1920s to 1950s have been considered the golden years of the Christian faith. Churches grew with enormous national influence and Americans were classified as “Protestant, Catholic, and Jews,” which became the title of a book written by Will Herberg. With the combination of factors such as the immigration restrictions of the 1920s and the evangelical outreach of denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention, the Methodists, and others, Protestants increased to 63.7 percent; Catholics, 53.9 percent; and Jews 22.5 percent, according to Herberg. “In 1950 total church membership was reckoned at 85,319,000; or about

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57 percent of the total population. In 1958 it was 109,557,741; or about 63 percent, marking an all-time high in the nation's history."² As far as diversity is concerned, the 1920s to 1950s were the most homogeneous period in the United States' history because of the immigration restriction primarily for people of primarily European descent.

The Law that Changed America

The trend, nevertheless, changed in the 1960s; precisely in the 1965 immigration act known as "Hart-Celler Immigration Act." The law "repealed the restrictionist admissions system based on discriminatory nationality quotas that had severely limited immigration to the U.S. since 1920s. This act installed a new global admissions system under which immigration reached all-time high levels by the end of the 20th century."³ Furthermore, the law also "put numerical limits on immigration from the Western Hemisphere for the first time—limits that would lead to growing undocumented or illegal immigration in the coming decades."⁴ This 1965 law has contributed to the most profound changes in the United States today in regard to immigration, demography, and culture. In conjunction with international trade conflicts, globalization, the influence of multinational companies, and the effect of the internet, the world of the 21st century has dramatically changed from that of the 20th century. As Jim Slack said, "Immigration has been the most consistent, persistent and influential shaping force and agent of change in American (Canadian, US and Latin American) history."⁵ Slack also made the following observations;

1. Immigrants into the USA from 1700s to the 1920s melded and adapted to frontier and economic situations on the frontier that caused most immigrants to assimilate enough to develop a new American culture-Anglo.
2. Given that an overwhelming majority of the immigrants from 1775 to 1900s were from Europe, their assimilation into American society created a strong and influential Anglo culture, incorrectly labeled as WASP—White Anglo-Saxon Protestant. In the process, a new ethnolinguistic people group was born.

²Will Herberg, *Protestant Catholic Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 47.

³Mary C. Waters and Reed Ueda, "Introduction" in *The New Americans: A Guide to Immigration Since 1965*. Edited by Mary C. Waters and Reed Ueda with Helen Marrow (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007) 2.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Jim Slack, "A Review of American History to Understand America's Current Cultural Status and The Implications for Evangelization." Original Edition Prepared For NAMB's 2006 Leadership Summit Current Revision Prepared For SBC State Convention Directors of Mission and Missouri, Oklahoma and South Carolina Staff Meetings in 2007.

3. However, seeing that the new immigrants of the 1890s and early 1900s were not northern Europeans and Protestants, immigration rules were passed. The main one was in 1924.
4. However, by the mid-1960s a new era of heightened immigration from non-Protestant and non-Christian ethnic settings arose.
5. Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s more non-Christian background ethnic groups migrated to the USA whose assimilation was minimal and thus far less thorough than the dominant Anglo American ethnic culture desired. The new ethnic groups coming to America want a “piece and place within the American dream and experience” with affirmation to perpetuate their own culture, language and religion in the USA.
6. As a result, secularism (in the form of New Age and Post-Modernism) and other world religions have emerged to change the face of America.
7. In reality, by 2000 A.D. in the USA, Protestantism and Christianity are on the decline with Evangelicals showing some signs of continued numerical growth. At the same time, all forms of Christianity are falling behind the population, secularization and ethnic presence curves that are washing over the nation.⁶

In other words, the church dominance of the cultural landscape is now a thing of the past. Christian faith henceforth has to justify its claim. Immigrants from other shores rather than Europe are here to stay, and the percentage of highly skilled professionals are coming more from Asia and Africa rather than Europe, while low skilled laborers are coming from countries south of U.S. borders. Kristi Heim reported in *The Seattle Times* in April 27, 2011, that “Attracted by opportunities in Seattle’s technology industry, a wave of professionals who grew up in China has contributed to a 55 percent increase in Seattle area’s Asian population over the past decade.”⁷ Furthermore, “Just 4.8 percent of the total U.S. population, Asians represent about 13.1 percent of the population in the Seattle metropolitan area, which includes Bellevue and Everett. People of Chinese descent are the largest segment, their ranks growing 67 percent between 2000 and 2009, to nearly 77,000.”⁸ The former Bible belt of the Northeast has become post modern and post-Christian. The Northwest region of the United States, which has never been conquered by the Gospel, remains the gateway of Asian migration and cultural diversity. Consequently, the United States is becoming more multicultural, multiethnic, and religiously pluralistic.

The Future of North America

To understand where the culture is moving and the missiological challenges and opportunities presented, we need to look at more figures. According to Karin Fischer in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*,

The number of foreign students attending American colleges hit an all-time high in 2008, capping three consecutive years of vigorous growth. Some 671,616 international students attended U.S. institutions in 2008-9, an increase of almost 8

⁶Ibid.

⁷Kristi Heim, “Wave of Chinese Professionals makes mark in Area” *The Seattle Times*, April 27, 2011.

⁸Ibid.

percent from a year earlier. First-time student enrollments grew even more robustly, by nearly 16 percent.⁹

Out of this number, Asian students account for 62%, Europe 13%, Latin America 10%, Africa 5%, Middle East 4%, North America 4%, and Oceania 1%.¹⁰

According to The Washington Post staff writers, Carol Morello and Dan Keating, minorities have become a majority over the past decade in affluent Montgomery County as the number of whites has plummeted, according to census figures released February 9, 2011.

In Montgomery and Prince George's counties, whites were largely replaced by Hispanics, a Washington Post analysis of the detailed census statistics shows. Hispanics outnumber blacks in Montgomery and just edge past whites in Prince George's County. Barely 49 percent of Montgomery's 972,000 residents are non-Hispanic whites, down from almost 60 percent in 2000 and 72 percent a decade before that. Hispanics rose by two-thirds and make up about 17 percent of the county's population.¹¹

Analyzing the 2010 United State Census result, Steven A. Camarota in *The Center for Immigration Studies* claimed that

Immigration accounted for three-quarters of population growth during the decade. Census Bureau data found 13.1 million new immigrants (legal and illegal) who arrived in the last 10 years; there were also about 8.2 million births to immigrant women during the decade. The numerical increase of 27.3 million this decade is exceeded by only two other decades in American history. Without a change in immigration policy, the nation is projected to add roughly 30 million new residents each decade for the foreseeable future.¹²

The greatest missiological issue arising from the census figure is not the news that USA population is now over 308 million, or “that population grew by 9.7% between 2000 and 2010, slower than any decade since the Great Depression in the 1930s.”¹³ While “the sweeping demographic changes going on in our nation are much more significant than just shifts in where

⁹Karin Fischer, “Number of Foreign Students in U.S. Hit a New High Last Year.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 16, 2009. Available online from <http://chronicle.com/article/Number-of-Foreign-Students-49142/>

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Carol Morello and Dan Keating, “Minorities are majority population in Montgomery County” *Washington Post*, Thursday, February 10, 2011.

¹²Steven A. Camarota, “Census: Population Up 27 Million in Just 10 Years” *The Center for Immigration Studies* <http://cis.org/2010CensusPopulation>

¹³Audrey Singer, “Don't jump to conclusions about census” http://articles.cnn.com/2010-12-21/opinion/singer.census.america_1_population-growth-hispanic-population-latino-population?_s=PM:OPINION

people live. We are becoming more diverse, and, as many analysts have noted, we will be a white-minority nation in about 30 years,”¹⁴ it is not the most pressing missiological issue.

Diversity that challenges the church missiologically is not primarily racial, although it has always challenged the American church. Even when immigrants were primarily Europeans and racial difficulties was simply “black and white.” The greatest challenge is many of the new immigrants are from a non-Christian background and adherent of different world religions. From the North American Mission Board we have the following statistics of religious plurality in United States and Canada at the end of the 20th century.

Catholic Church---Over 85 million in North America (about 25% of US and 40% of Canada); large numbers of Irish-Americans, Hispanics, and Quebecers (French Canadians).

Seventh-day Adventist Church---Just over a million in North America, especially in Southern and Western US states. Hispanic members especially prevalent in Southern California.

Jehovah’s Witnesses---Over 2.5 million in North America. One-fourth Hispanic, over one-fifth African-American. 60% of adult JW’s are women. JW’s are disproportionately poor.

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons)---Over 5 million in North America, three-fourths in Western US. Utah is 58% LDS; Idaho 23% LDS. 7% of LDS are Hispanic. LDS tend to have larger families.

Unitarian-Universalist Association (UUA)---Approaching a million in North America (half on the East Coast). Two-thirds are women; 10% are non-heterosexual. 98% are white (UUA is trying to change that).

Judaism---About 5.5 million, almost all of Jewish ethnicity (more in North America than in Israel). Half are Jews religiously (most not Orthodox), one-fourth are secular.

Islam---About 5-8 million in North America: mostly Middle Eastern and South Asian immigrants (about a fifth fleeing persecution), African-American, and some Caucasian converts.

Hinduism---1.5 million or more in North American, mostly immigrants from India; some converts through Transcendental Meditation (TM), ISKCON (“Hare Krishna”), etc.

Buddhism---2.5 million in North America, mostly Asian. Most Japanese and Vietnamese Americans are Buddhist. Most US Buddhists are on the West Coast and Hawaii.

¹⁴Ibid.

Sikhism---Roughly 100,000 in the US, 300,000 in Canada. Most are descendants of immigrants from the Punjab in India (where Sikhism began). A few thousand converts.

Baha'i World Faith---Up to 200,000 in North America, mostly in the US, from a variety of people groups, e.g., Iranian immigrants, North American converts.

Neopaganism and Wicca---There is no reliable figures; likely over half a million in North America, apparently mostly Caucasians (occult religion takes different forms in other ethnic groups).

New Age Movement---No clear boundaries, so no reliable figures; probably near a million self-described advocates and many more influenced; mostly Caucasian and African-American.¹⁵

It should be noted that the above statistics are based on the 2000 Census figures. It is extremely conservative and out of date. For example, Warith Deen Muhammed, leader of the Muslim American Society (MAS), the largest African-American Muslim organization states that there are at least eleven million Muslims in the United States.¹⁶ Consequently, North America has become one of the fastest growing mission fields. The figure is alarming when cultural Christians who have no personal relationship with Jesus Christ are included, plus the Atheists, Agnostics or Non-Religious, which according to Atheist Empire website, is about ten percent of the population.¹⁷ The 2010 *Time Almanac* puts the figure of Agnostics in United States to- 11.2%, and Atheists- 0.4%¹⁸ Altogether, they constituted 11.6% of American population as of 2005. When juxtaposed to the 2010 American Census, Atheists and Agnostics will be than 30 million.

It is obvious that times have changed. The United States of America of the 1920s to 1950s is no more. Even if new restrictions are imposed today, because of the diverse population already in North America, it will become more pluralistic, the future destined to multiculturalism, secularism and a large mission field. The new mission field is more complex and sophisticated than any other period in history. Although many have their primary residence in the United States, they are global trotters. This is true of leaders of multinational corporations, the oil and gas industry, political leaders, high-tech industry leaders, correspondents, security

¹⁵See the material entitled "Cross the Bridge to Understanding other Faiths" www.namb.net/interfaith. The material can be ordered from www.namb.net/catalog. ISBN 0840088310.

¹⁶Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad. *Not Quite American? The Shaping of Arab and Muslim Identity in the United States*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2004, 1-2.

¹⁷<http://atheistempire.com/>

¹⁸"World Religious Adherents in the United States" 2010 *Time Almanac* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2009, 510-511.

agents, aviation experts, NGOs, and the list continues. Others may not travel outside their county, but are connected to the world through internet and technology. Satellite and cable TV providers have also helped in bridging the geo-cultural divide by offering international TV channels. Verizon Fios TV for example, offers more than 60 international TV channels and Dish Network offers over 200 channels to their customers in 28 languages. Some of the channels are in Spanish, Arabic, Bosnian and Herzegovina, Russian, Mandarin, Cambodian, German, Punjabi, Korean, Vietnamese, Portuguese, Persian, Romanian, Italian, Armenian, Filipino, French, Hindi, Gujarati, Polish, and Japanese. What a world we live in!

Meet the New Americans

To put a face to the new America, *nouveaux arrivants*, our new neighbors, people we are to love, reach and disciple for Jesus, I have chosen three representatives of the non Christians living in the same city, and the same neighborhood to illustrate the complexity and missiological challenge facing the American church. In a course that I teach, “Immigration and Church Planting,” an assignment I gave to students was to write a case study of a non-Christian immigrant to North America giving details of background, culture, religion, and the reasons for migrating to United States. Students were to pay attention to the immigrant process of acculturation, what he or she is contributing to the American multicultural story. Out of that assignment, here is the synopsis of three immigrants to illustrate new Americans.

Arjun

Arjun is a 26-year-old male who grew up in a small town in India, but now lives in New Orleans pursuing a PHD in Physics. He was raised in the summer months by his grandparents. His grandfather was his teacher and role model. His mom would sit and help with homework while his grandmother cooked. From his grandparents, he learned swimming, cricket, and volleyball. Arjun had a rigorous routine as a child: he woke up daily at 5am and would run in the mountains. At 6:30 am, he would go for swimming; and at 7:30am, he would go back home – eat, relax, and start studying at 9:00am-until late afternoon. In the evening, he would play cricket till night, come home, eat, and go to sleep. Arjun is Hindu; culturally and religiously. He imbibed all cultural and religious practices of his faith. He goes to the temple and prays and reads the Vedas (Hindu scriptures) every day. He prays the *mantras* (a sacred word, chant, or sound that is repeated during meditation to facilitate spiritual power and transformation of

consciousness). Every Thursday he fasts. He fasts to the god *Sai baba*, as his offering to this particular deity. Arjun migrated to the United States because of the opportunities that abound in the country and its schools. He plans to settle down in the United States after his studies.

When asked how he feels about being an immigrant in the US, Arjun responded, “At first I felt like I was in an ocean where you can’t drink the water! It was a big culture shock when I arrived.” However, as he has adjusted, he started to understand more of the culture, the US educational system and politics. He claimed that in Minneapolis people were arrogant and treated him poorly because of his accent. But in New Orleans, he has been treated generally well in school. Arjun has been trying to build relationships with Americans but has discovered that many are too individualistic and have no time for meaningful friendships. He still feels lonely. When asked how he is contributing to American multicultural story, Arjun points to his research on digital imagery and signal processing. He is also the head of the Chakra Indian student association which offers people opportunities to understand Indian festivals and culture.

Anton

Anton, age 26, migrated to the United States from Lithuania via Britain and Italy. Lithuania, as part of the former Soviet Union, never experienced freedom of speech and religion. However, the majority of Lithuanians live a comfortable life (families usually own apartments or houses, one car, food, and could vacation cheaply, etc.). Nevertheless, in those days, alcoholism was a major problem among Lithuanian people. It was an escape from their pains because during Stalin’s period many Lithuanians were imprisoned in compulsory work camps. Some were allowed to return but could not discuss their experiences freely, hence alcohol dependency.

Anton’s mother gave birth to him when she was a nursing student, but because she was an alcoholic, his grandmother raised him. Anton never knew his biological father. His grandmother was a Catholic and tried to raise Anton in traditional Catholic spirituality within the context of the Old Soviet system. He was baptized, confirmed, and for a while attended mass regularly while living with his grandmother.

Anton was an engineering student in Lithuania before moving to England where he completed his studies. He lived and worked in England, and later moved to Italy where he also worked before migrating to the United States. In both England and Italy, Anton had good jobs and was comfortable. In the USA, he is now employed in a job that pays less than \$10 an hour.

Anton left his lucrative job in Europe and migrated to the USA because he got into trouble with the law. He had no intention of returning to the European Union to face justice, hence his decision to settle in the United States. Although raised a Catholic, Anton has become an Agnostic and has a low view of life, marriage, and the law. In the words of my student, Anton “is postmodern, autonomous, dresses like an American, speaks British, looks like a Scandinavian, drives like a Russian, eats at American restaurants, lives the American life, but never interested in religion and family.”

Ronald

Ronald, age 55, was part of a group of middle-aged men who emigrated in the year 2000 from Zimbabwe. To them, it was a great opportunity when they were asked to travel to the United States for job opportunities. Most of these men were boilermakers, fitters, turners, and welders. Pretending they were going to attend a conference in the United States, they were assisted to get their B1 (visitors) visas and they paid their own way. Upon arrival in Massachusetts, they were delivered to their employer who had an enormous project in the works and needed these cheap skilled workers. The working conditions were appalling. The weather was as unfriendly as the wages. Their passports were confiscated by their employer and even if they could get them, their visas would not allow them to work. Their options were either to stay until their visas expired and then return home, or risk life in the United States as illegal immigrants.

They decided to stay and struggled to get supplies for daily sustenance. Whenever there were ‘feed the homeless’ campaigns, they took advantage. It did not matter to them whether they were Catholics, Hare Krishnas, or Baptists. All they wanted was food. Sometimes they had to go without. In spite of all that, they decided to keep going and looking for a way out of their predicament. Then, Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005.

The group had never paid attention to this southern city, but when news came that reconstruction had increased the demand for manpower, they all headed south. Beside the fact that none could afford flying, they did not need to risk getting past the airport security. They rode in buses and traveled the long journey south. When they arrived in New Orleans, they did not have a destination. A few places were still open, feeding Katrina victims and they joined the lines. Contractors were looking for as much cheap labor as they could find and in good time they

all had jobs. While working as unskilled workers, they kept their ears open for any job opportunities within their trades. Their wait was rewarded when they were employed in a ship yard as welders. They moved to an apartment complex and began to live as they had only dreamt. They could send money back home, buy cars, and live like everybody else. They applied for asylum and were fortunate enough to be granted.

Ronald has a rural African background. He was brought up in the heart of *Shona* culture. He has no interest to assimilate into the American society. He resisted learning the English language, and only speaks when he has no choice. He isolates himself from others. Ronald's educational background was not as good as the rest of the men on the team with which he came. He had a minimal education of a GED he received since immigrating to the United States. He did not seem to have any interest in further education as much as he had the desire to make money. His concern is for the education of his children. He has been faithful to send support for their education since he moved to the United States.

When Ronald came to the United States, he had been married for about 20 years. The move to the United States cost him ten years of separation from his wife and children. Because of his undocumented status, he could not travel to his country. But he continued to support his wife and children during the full length of his stay in the United States as a single man. Even without a great education, Ronald invested greatly in his children's education. Prisca, his wife, eventually joined him just over a year ago. She acknowledged that she was well taken care of during the time of their separation. For instance, even though she could not drive, he bought her a car from Japan and shipped it to Zimbabwe for her use.

Religion is not a big part of Ronald's life. He is not hostile towards it and is friendly to the religious people he has encountered. However, he does not feel the obligation to be fully devoted to religious matters. Even though Ronald does not espouse overt religious convictions, he is an African Traditional Religionist. People who hold to this religious position usually do not want to make it known to others as it may be seen as a primitive faith, a religion of the poor and uneducated. Since the African Traditional Religions, at least in the Zimbabwean context, generally do not have organized tenets of faith or Divine Liturgy, there is no serious commitment expected from adherents.

The most interesting thing is that in any major or middle-sized United States or Canadian city, there may be Arjuns, Antons, and Ronalds living side by side in the same neighborhood,

shopping in the same mall, their children attending the same school district and participating in the same community events. Indeed, the mission field is no longer beyond the North American shores but across the streets. My family formerly lived in a small suburban community north of Seattle, on a street of twenty houses. Out of these twenty houses, there were families whose roots were from Indonesia, Japan, Nigeria, China, Europe (white Americans), Korea, Singapore, Peru, Mexico, and the Philippines. According to Haya El Nasser in *USA Today* of June 10, 2010, “Record levels of births among minorities in the past decade are moving the USA a step closer to a demographic milestone in which no group commands a majority, new Census estimates show. Minorities accounted for almost 49% of U.S. births in the year ending July 1, 2009.”¹⁹ In Mukilteo School District of Washington State, more than 2,200 students speak a language other than English. At the last count, (2010) they spoke 86 different languages. “Generic is no longer a characteristic in the USA, even among Anglos”²⁰ according to Jim Slack.

In New Orleans, where I currently live, Slack’s statement is definitely true. It can be seen in every neighborhood, in Mardi Gras parades; at city parks, and in school districts. For example, Benjamin Franklin High School, the number one public high school in the state of Louisiana since the inception of the competitive distinction, is one of very few schools in the nation that have won the coveted Presidential Blue Ribbon of Distinction Award from the Department of Education each time it has been offered. Benjamin Franklin High School ranks as one of the best high schools in the nation by a range of independent research studies and national publications. Its current (2011-2012) enrollment of 733 students in ninth through twelfth grades has students from all ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds and include a 55% minority population.²¹

The Missiological Challenge

Again, the complexity is not in race or ethnicity but in worldviews. “The issue of worldview will loom larger and larger in more and more settings in the USA,”²² and will pose the most difficult missiological challenge. Already it can be seen in the political arena in the

¹⁹Haya El Nasser. “Minority births drive growth in U.S. diversity” http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/census/2010-06-10-census-minorities_N.htm

²⁰ Jim Slack, “A Review of American History to Understand America’s Current Cultural Status and The Implications for Evangelization.” Original Edition Prepared For: NAMB’s 2006 Leadership Summit Current Revision Prepared For: SBC State Convention Directors of Mission and Missouri, Oklahoma and South Carolina Staff Meetings in 2007.

²¹ <http://www.benfranklinhighschool.org>

²² Ibid.

form of value voters, the Tea Party, and the Occupy Movement. The postmodern Anton did not leave his postmodernism in Europe; neither did Arjun abandon his Hindu faith, nor Ronald his African Traditional Religion at the border. On the contrary, they are all protected in the constitution as freedom of religion. Their religious beliefs provided an identity and worldview reference. As they adjust to the American way of life, and their former cultures are stripped from them, they tend to hold on to and underline their religious heritage by becoming more committed.

Furthermore, even when they (Anton, Arjun and Ronald) are converted to the Christian faith, assuming the church will live out her responsibility and share the gospel of Jesus Christ, their view of life and interpretation of the new faith will be colored by their previous faith, experiences, and cultural backgrounds. Religious tenets require not only mental approval but pragmatic living. Todd Gitlin, pointed out in *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars*,

How men and women think is not simply a function of what they have seen or felt in their own lives. Nor is their form of thought a genetic shadow cast by their parents or grandparents. People think within the intellectual and cultural currents that surround them--currents with histories, even if the sources cannot be seen from downstream.²³

How will the church in North America reach the world around us? What will the new church plant look like? What have been the practices in respect to new church planting to date? These are some of the questions mission researchers, practitioners, strategists and mission agency leaders should be answering.

²³ Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 200. See also Everett M. Rogers and Thomas M. Steinfatt, *Intercultural Communication* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 1999), 2.