



Migration and Global Mission

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Abstract “Migration and Global Missions” reflects on key issues that both Hispanic and Asian North American churches face in response to migration and global missions.

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INTRODUCTION

Among the six meta-categories of racial/ethnic groups as delineated in the U.S. Census (Black, White, Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander, and Hispanic),¹ only two have major migration movements currently: Asians and Hispanics. Euro-Americans have largely forgotten their migration story. African Americans in large part tell the story of their forced migration. Native Americans have been here all along. However, the story of Hispanic and Asian North Americans (HANA) is a story of migration: Hispanics and Asian North Americans are the two groups that cannot tell our story without migration.

Migration, of course, has much to do with missions because both involve movements of peoples and crossing cultures. Some important questions arise, then, with regard to diaspora peoples in mission: 1) In what ways should today’s migration/immigration patterns inform how we should think about current and future global missions? 2) What might be God’s specific calling for our churches in terms of participating in His global mission? 3) What new missiological strategies/practices are emerging from our immigrant churches? Are there any lessons we can learn from one another? Are there any opportunities for collaborative partnership in this area? 4) As growing immigrant churches in the United States, what role can we play in helping the North American church develop a more effective missions partnership with the growing non-Western churches around the world?

I. KEY ISSUES AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

Theologically, migration—as opposed to settledness—should be the Christian reality. On the literal level, almost every hero from the Bible has some sort of migration experience. On a spiritual level, the journey to the Promised Land is not just an Old Testament theme but a New Testament one as well (e.g., Hebrews 11). The reality of the Christian is one of being a sojourner. We are aliens and strangers in this world, and our true home is in Heaven as we look forward to The Day (Heb. 10:25). In this sense, HANA people, with a cross-cultural lack of rootedness, perhaps have a better window into the Christian life than people who do not experience this sense of liminality. The danger, however, is the temptation to buy into

* At the June 2013 HANA consultation, Jeanette Yep and Juan Martínez functioned as the track leaders who co-facilitated this track conversation on Migration and Global Mission. Allen Yeh, a member of this track conversation, took on the role of the writing this article for the track.

¹ In the 2010 Census, the question “of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin” was listed separately from the other five racial categories (because of the conclusion that Hispanic is not a race). For the purpose of this report, I will consider it a sixth category, even while acknowledging one can be Hispanic and one of the other five at the same time. “About Race,” United States Census Bureau, last accessed October 23, 2014, <http://www.census.gov/topics/population/race/about.html>.

the “American Dream” and to find our treasure here on earth. There are three key issues for which migration has major implications: aging, economics, and mission.

AGING AND ECONOMICS

These are two separate issues, but I will consider them together because they have much synergy with each other. In Acts 2, the people at Pentecost are mainly retirees. The elderly had moved back to Jerusalem to die and be buried there, and inadvertently became the ones who started the Church and were there to experience the first move of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps there needs to be a rethink about who are the ones who drive change: is it always young people? In our present world, though aging is a major issue (especially in places like Japan and China where there aren't enough young people to support the older generation), life expectancy is increased and therefore we have more active retirees, so they can be regarded not merely as passive receivers.

Though the older generation may be doing better than expected, the younger generation is doing worse. Despite the youth percentage in this world shrinking, there is a growing rate of youth unemployment in this world. Therefore economics are a major driving force behind migration, especially as young people move elsewhere to find jobs. One manifestation of this is a “brain drain” where the best and brightest leave their (developing) home countries to go to developed nations. On the other hand, developed nations need people who are willing to do menial labor too—hence we find HANA people in the highest strata of society and wealth as well as the lowest. This means, however, that the divide between rich and poor becomes even greater, especially since rich countries have fewer children and poorer countries have more children. Immigrants often are viewed as self-serving; but as places like Europe are experiencing a mass exodus of people due to unemployment (the most obvious example being Greece), could it be conceivable that there is a future where nations are competing for immigrants as a commodity? The birth replacement rate of white Americans has dropped since the 1970s. It is actually immigrants and ethnic minorities that have kept the United States from facing a demographic population crisis. The United States receives the largest absolute numbers of international migrants in the world.² But laws are increasing in strictness even as immigration increases around the world, hampering some of the freedom of migration.

The trend is not just movement from poor countries to rich countries, but from rural to urban. It is worth noting that most of the world's megacities are not actually in the United States.³ HANA migrants want to move to any place which offers economic opportunity,⁴ therefore the BRIC and CIVETS countries are becoming increasingly appealing as well.⁵

GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY AND MISSION

As migratory peoples, HANA populations can be alternatively either the agents or targets of mission. What advantages and disadvantages do diaspora peoples have in being the missionaries themselves? How do missionaries reach peoples “on the move”?

² In terms of percentage, however, it is the Middle East which has the greatest international migrant population growth.

³ New York and Los Angeles are the only two Western cities that even make it into the list of the top 20 cities in the world, in terms of population.

⁴ Five hundred thousand American citizens leave the United States every year for various reasons (more employment openings abroad, marriage, better retirement plans, and socialized health care elsewhere), so the United States certainly does not have the monopoly on economic opportunities.

⁵ Economists coined these terms in 2001 and 2009, respectively, to identify the world's newest fastest-growing economies. They stand for: Brazil, Russia, India, China; and Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, Turkey, South Africa.

Regarding the first question, multicultural people (which also includes Third Culture Kids and missionary kids) are already polycentric and thus are instinctively already better equipped for mission because they know how to “shift” between worlds. Bilingual people are better at learning a third language than monolingual people are at learning a second language, because they understand that language is not just about words, it’s about worldview. The knowledge of and engagement with other major world religions is a boon as well. HANA migrants often understand Islam or Buddhism in a way that the average American may not. HANA migrants are often also deeply religious themselves, and usually Christian. One implication of this pertains to morality, and the other to religiosity. Religious people are often more morally conservative, meaning that HANA migration may have ethical implications for North American society as a whole. And because white people tend to be agnostic/atheist, a strong HANA presence turns back the tide of secularism.⁶ This may be especially amazing if universities,⁷ long the bastion of humanism, become more religious over time. All these descriptors cohere with Philip Jenkins’s observation in *The Next Christendom* that “On present evidence, a Southernized Christian future should be distinctly conservative”⁸ and with Lamin Sanneh’s assertion that “Christianity has become *ambicultural* as the faith of multiple language users straddling national and social boundaries.”⁹

The second question poses some challenges in that it is more difficult to target a diaspora people if they are not concentrated only in their country of origin. However, this can prove to be an advantage because there is no need to move overseas to find HANA people; mission is in our own backyard. Diaspora peoples are not as diffuse as one might imagine. As mentioned in the previous section, HANA migrants tend to be drawn to major urban centers and in fact even cluster together within certain city neighborhoods, so even if they are small in number they are easy to find. HANA are also a field ripe for harvest. Increasingly, the largest churches in America are non-white and Pentecostal/independent. Ethnic minority Christianity is becoming non-white at a faster rate than even the U.S. population. To take one example, 25% of universities are non-white, but 35% of seminaries are already non-white. As we look into the future, this begs a whole slew of questions: What will happen when the United States has a potential divide between a white secular society and a non-white Christian society? Will this further politicize Christianity as a gatekeeper of public morality rather than being about the Gospel?¹⁰ Is a good use of our resources to channel them into privatization of faith issues such as abortion and gay marriage, or does doing so derail us from our main goals? What sorts of funding models are advantageous—how much does the tax structure incentivize faith-based organizations? Would a HANA Christianity result in a rise in Christianity but a decline in self-identified evangelicals?

II. HISPANIC AND ASIAN NORTH AMERICAN MIGRATION EXPERIENCES: EXPLORING POSSIBLE DIFFERENCES

Despite the fact that migration is so singular to the HANA experience, Hispanics and ANAs experience this phenomenon in different ways, not only with regard to the three issues outlined above, but also with the added dimension of transnationalism.

⁶ Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009). Rah points out the fallacy of thinking that New England is the most secular place in America. Perhaps this is true among the white churches which are largely empty, but look down the back alleyways and you’ll find Haitian and Brazilian and Korean and Chinese churches bursting at the seams.

⁷ The largest freshman population of white students in America was in 2006, but the percentage continues to drop every year.

⁸ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 8.

⁹ Sanneh, Lamin, and Joel Carpenter, eds., *The Changing Face of Christianity: Africa, the West, and the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 214.

¹⁰ We have already seen this struggle in the Anglican/Episcopal Church where it has become a struggle over homosexuality, with the Africans taking the conservative stance and the Europeans and Americans taking the liberal stance.

AGING AND ECONOMICS

Asians, like whites, are an aging population, but this mostly has to do with socio-economic reasons. It is a near-universal trend that richer, developed nations have fewer children, and poorer, developing nations tend to have more children. As Asians' (both in Asia and in North America) average income soars, the number of children correspondingly declines. Hispanics, on the other hand, are getting younger in their average age.

Education could be a factor as well. Education tends to be a high priority for most ANAs whereas it is not necessarily one of the top priorities for Hispanics. This may have to do with the immigration mentality: many ANAs come to America to stay for good, while many Hispanics see themselves as temporary residents who are here to make money to send home. There is more of a desire to reunite with their family than to linger here, so there is less long-term investment in the United States.

GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY AND MISSION

Hispanics and ANAs have a high percentage of Christians and their churches are very large. There is a marked difference, however: the former is mostly either Catholic or Pentecostal, and the latter is mostly Protestant evangelical. Therefore the two groups may not actually agree theologically or have ecumenical partnerships, despite having so many similarities in other spheres.

With regard to being targets of mission: Hispanics are fairly monoreligious, so the biggest issue to address is nominalism; whereas Asians are very multireligious, and an understanding of major world religions is necessary to engage them. Hispanics may not actually have that much interaction with other faiths if they grew up in mostly all-Hispanic contexts. Asians, on the other hand, cannot escape the presence of a pluralism of religions. This may affect the missional strategies and effectiveness of each group.

TRANSNATIONALISM

For HANA migrants, it is culture and ethnicity that tends to be more of a unifier than nationality. However, this is expressed in different ways amongst Hispanics and ANAs.

Hispanics tend to unify around language and not ethnicity. As Hispanics can be racially white, black, brown, Asian, or almost anything else, it is language that binds them. Speaking Spanish makes one Hispanic, whether they are from Spain or the Caribbean or South America.

ANAs usually unify around ethnicity and not culture. Asian languages—even dialects of the same language!—are often mutually unintelligible. Yet the bond that exists between, say, Korean and Chinese, is one of race and physiological similarities. Or, the people within the same ethnicity who are from different countries will also find a bond—a Japanese person from Brazil will still feel a kinship with a Japanese person from Japan, even if the former cannot speak a word of Japanese.

III. CONCLUSION

There are three main conclusions that our track group gathered from our discussions. They are: Changing Contexts, Resources, and Strategies.

CHANGING CONTEXTS

An inevitability of being migratory people is that HANA demographics are continually shifting. What may be true today is not necessarily true tomorrow. An awareness of the most current trends is a necessity.

Keeping up with demographic shifts is difficult but if we fail to keep “up to speed” we may lose the missiological advantage we have by leveraging our diaspora nature. Some HANA groups move and keep moving; some move and settle; and still others are newly arrived. Migration is never static.

Even vocabulary continues to change. Our group decided that “migration” is the preferred word to “immigration” because the latter implies that the person is the object of the host society, whereas the former is someone who is the subject of the process. There is autonomy and self-empowerment found in the word “migration,” and it is a more missiological word as well.

There are many other factors which can affect migration as well, such as climate change and the growth of Islam. How do we respond carefully and wisely to such issues of the day, instead of just viscerally?

Up until now, the United States has been the richest and most Christian nation on earth. What happens, in the future, when we lose our primacy in one or the other? How will HANA communities take leadership in new and fresh ways? If we know that we will not be population minorities in the next thirty years (and especially in the church), how do we handle this transfer of power in the wisest way?

RESOURCES

Diaspora can imply the harnessing of horizontal resources of people across the globe, but we also have vertical resources that are unique to migratory people such as retirees. These are unique channels that we can avail ourselves of in creative ways. In the horizontal sense is the constant fresh flow of migrants who can provide not only more manpower but also new vision. There is also transnationalism: HANA people have a built-in network of people across the globe who can be our eyes and ears, as well as our hands and brains. In the vertical sense, with the importance of families in HANA cultures, elders are venerated and held in high honor in a way that is missing in white American culture. Retirees are a largely untapped resource.

Two other resources that have great potential are storytelling and technology. One is an ancient art and one is modern. Storytelling has stood the test of time because it is endemic to how we are wired—it has far more effectiveness than mere propositional truth. Technology, however, has the ability to either undo storytelling or complement it. Ironically, video and audio are actually causing us to become a less literate society by taking us away from the written word. However, it also provides alternative media through which to tell the old, old story, and can thus be very effective (e.g., the Jesus film).

STRATEGIES

There is preparation for the task as well as engagement in the task itself. Running through all of this are the threads of economic shifts, age shifts, and engagement of world religions and global Christianity. These are external foci. However, there also need to be internal foci, namely collaboration. HANA people need to learn from each other in the areas where they are deficient. Hispanics could be more effective in mission if they knew more about major world religions. This is not just a Hispanic problem; most Americans cannot articulate another world religion. But the understanding must go beyond even the textbook definition; many people we will encounter don't often follow the textbook definition in reality. Someone may claim they are Muslim but they may be just culturally so. ANAs could be more effective in mission if they knew more about Catholicism (the largest form of Christianity in the world) and Pentecostalism (the fastest-growing form of Christianity around the world).

This track has the most obvious missiological framing and therein lies its primary importance. The other five tracks do not naturally have missiology in it. We need to think in terms of Reverse Mission and other ways we can turn traditional power structures on their head. Mission is an issue of power, but what kind of power it is makes all the difference. Mission from migration and the underside of history is perhaps a more biblical model: it allows for a reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8) instead of on the

power of Christendom or money, which is how white Western Christians have done mission for most of their history.

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