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# World Diasporas: An Opportunity for World Mission

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*Many of us who cannot leave our home country on Christian mission have world mission coming to our doorstep—in the form of increasing numbers of international refugees and migrants. This article explains the cultural situation experienced by members of today's world diasporas and how the body of Christ can reach out to them.*

Millions of people are on the move. According to the United Nations, 244 million people live outside their country of origin.<sup>1</sup> This figure is projected to rise to 405 million by 2050.<sup>2</sup> The UN High Commission on Refugees claims that in 2019, an unprecedented 70.8 million people around the world were forced to leave their homes. This number included nearly 26 million refugees, over half of whom were under age 18. No other time in human history has had such high numbers of migrants. We truly live in an 'age of migration'.<sup>3</sup>

This unfolding reality presents the global church with new challenges. Sam George, professor of missiology at Wheaton College and chair of the diaspora network of the Lausanne Movement for World Evangelization, describes mission to people in diaspora as like 'shooting a moving target'.<sup>4</sup> How do we share the good news of the gospel with people on the move, who are searching for a new identity between the culture of their ancestors and the new culture they have become part of through migration?

The world has become a global village in which different cultures seek to co-exist and where people try to find meaningful ways of living together. A contemporary theory of Christian mission needs to answer the following questions: What must Christian mission take into consideration when engaging with these migrant communities, generally referred to as the diaspora? What can we learn from and share with these newly forming communities of people who may

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1 Doris Peschke, 'Weiter wachsende Zahlen. Flucht und Migration: Zahlen, Daten, Fakten', in *Zuflucht Europa*, Mission Yearbook 2016 (Hamburg: EMW, 2016), 40.

2 Amelia Hill, 'Migrants, Expats, Asylum Seekers, Refugees, IDPs—What Are the Differences?' *The Guardian*, 10 September 2018.

3 Hein de Haas, Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (London and New York: Red Globe Press, 2020).

4 Sam George, 'The Past and Future of Evangelical Mission', paper presented at the EMS Regional Conference, Toronto, 6 March 2020.

hold the new key to world evangelization? What role can the World Evangelical Alliance and other global Christian organizations play in all this?

## Defining diaspora

The term *diaspora* (from the Greek word for a scattering or sowing of seeds) refers to any people group or ethnic population that is forced or induced to leave their traditional homelands and becomes dispersed throughout other parts of the world, along with the ensuing developments in their culture.<sup>5</sup> Originally the term was used to describe the scattered Jews, who lived outside Israel beginning with the Babylonian captivity beginning around 607 BC.<sup>6</sup> Since the 1950s, the term has broadly applied to groups of people living outside their original homelands.<sup>7</sup>

Diasporas typically seek to preserve their own cultural and sometimes linguistic identity. Members of a diaspora live bi-culturally. They have social contacts with their 'host culture' neighbours as well as with members of their own ethnic group in other countries.<sup>8</sup> As a rule, the relation of kinship is the stronger of the two. A member of a Turkish diaspora in Germany or France will have much more in common with fellow Turks than with their neighbours of German or French background.

Often, kinship ties amongst diaspora groups are transferred to the global level through the development of ethnic networks.<sup>9</sup> An Iranian businessman whom I (Johannes) met on a recent flight from Frankfurt to Toronto proudly explained to me how this works. He lives in Canada and runs his business in Asia. His sister, a medical doctor, lives in Germany and has a cousin in Sweden. 'I am related to people in almost all Western countries', he said. 'They speak the local languages and are fully integrated in their particular societies. But between us we speak Farsi, the language of our heart.'

Nina Glick and her research colleagues call people like this Canadian-Iranian contact *transmigrants*.<sup>10</sup> They easily adjust to different cultures and have multiple identities. 'As a result, family and kinship have moved from a largely local to a global scale.'<sup>11</sup> Transmigrant communities build networks across national borders. Monica Boyd writes:

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5 Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), ix.

6 Narry F. Santos, 'Exploring the Major Dispensation Terms and Realities in the Bible', in Enoch Wan (ed.), *Diaspora Missiology: Theory, Methodology and Practice* (Portland, OR: Institute of Diaspora Studies, 2011), 35–52.

7 Enoch Wan, *Diaspora Missiology: Theory, Methodology and Practice* (Portland, OR: Institute of Diaspora Studies, 2011), 14–18; Jana Evans Brasiel and Anita Mannur, *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 4.

8 Nina Glick et al., 'From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration', *Anthropological Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (1995): 48–63.

9 Nadje Ali-Ali and Khalid Koser, eds., *New Approaches to Migration? Transnational Communities and the Transformation of Home* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3–4; Monica Boyd, 'Family and Personal Networks in International Migration: Recent Developments and New Agendas', *International Migration Review* 23, no. 3 (1989): 641.

10 Glick et al., 'From Immigrant to Transmigrant'.

11 Ali-Ali and Koser, *New Approaches*, 3–4.

Networks connect migrants across time and space. Once begun, migration flows often become self-sustaining, reflecting the establishment of networks of information, assistance and obligations, which develop between migrants in the host society and friends and relatives in the sending area. These networks link populations in origin and receiving countries and ensure that movements are not necessarily limited in time, unidirectional or permanent.<sup>12</sup>

Diasporas are connected to both their old and new home countries. This was already typical of the early Jewish diaspora.<sup>13</sup> Today, in times of globalization, transnationality and connectivity have enormously intensified.<sup>14</sup> Although migrants may leave their homelands, many do not sever ties with their past and they build strong relationships with others who have migrated. This sense of living in two worlds, or in a parallel world relative to those around them, can result in isolation and disintegration of the given group from the majority population.<sup>15</sup>

According to William Safran, most diasporas are marked by the following distinctives:<sup>16</sup>

1. A common place of origin, which institutes a symbolic center of communal life for the group
2. A common longing for the lost homeland and the dream of returning one day
3. A common feeling of being a minority in the society to which they belong
4. Common solidarity with the country of origin
5. A common sense of belonging to the same ethnic and social group and sharing a common destiny

Being a social group with a distinct identity may have positive as well as negative effects. An intentionally lived identity is a prerequisite for any integration into society.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, it may also foster isolation and escape from society. The German theologian Eberhard Werner writes, 'Negative effects are political and religious radicalization, economic poverty and ethnic tensions, often resulting in criminal acts.'<sup>18</sup> In Germany, the negative effects of closed diasporal communities can be observed amongst the Turkish diaspora<sup>19</sup> and the development of the radical Muslim Salafi movement.<sup>20</sup>

12 Boyd, 'Family and Personal Networks', 641.

13 See for instance Ted Rubesh, 'Diaspora Distinctives: The Jewish Diaspora Experience in the Old Testament', in Enoch Wan (ed.), *Diaspora Missiology: Theory, Methodology and Practice* (Portland, OR: Institute of Diaspora Studies, 2011), 53–86.

14 Wan, *Diaspora Missiology*, 31.

15 Paloma Fernandez de la Hoz, *Familienleben, Transnationalität und Diaspora* (Vienna: Österreichisches Institut für Familienforschung, 2004), 17–18; Eberhard Werner, 'Migration und Flucht—Diaspora als Lebensmitte: Einleitende missiologische Überlegungen', *Evangelische Missiologie* 32, no. 2 (2016): 94–95.

16 William Safran, 'Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return', *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1, no. 1 (1991): 83–84; Fernandez de la Hoz, *Familienleben*, 20–21.

17 See Wilfred Felix, *Theologie vom Rand der Gesellschaft. Eine indische Vision* (Freiburg: Herder, 2006), 68–92.

18 Werner, 'Migration', 96.

19 Werner, 'Migration', 94–95.

20 See Mohammad Abu Rumman, *I Am a Salafi: A Study of the Actual and Imagined Identities of*

Diasporal communities form around extended family and clan-driven structures.<sup>21</sup> The willingness of an extended family to change decides how open the group will be with regard to integrating into the host culture.<sup>22</sup> The family's attitude determines whether the group will isolate itself or pursue social integration. This could affect how missions to the diaspora are re-strategized and re-framed—for example, with a focus on family-friendly evangelism as an effective strategy and entry point.

## Diasporas: a new perspective for mission

Our approaches to Christian mission are being challenged by diasporal developments throughout the world, and missiological reflections on this challenge have only recently begun. The Korean missiologists S. Hun Kim and Wonsuk Ma date the beginning of such reflection to the founding of the Chinese Coordinating Committee for World Evangelization in 1976 in Hong Kong,<sup>23</sup> after which a number of international meetings followed. Of significant importance was the Lausanne Forum in Pattaya, Thailand in 1980, where the working group on diaspora mission produced a paper entitled 'The New People Next Door'.<sup>24</sup>

In 2009 the Lausanne Diasporas Leadership Team (LDLT) was formed, and it was largely responsible for the Seoul Declaration on Diaspora Missiology, adopted by the Lausanne Diaspora Educators Consultation in November 2009. The LDLT was merged into the Global Diaspora Network Advisory Board at the Third Lausanne Congress in Cape Town, South Africa in 2010.<sup>25</sup> This step marked the beginnings of what is called 'diasporal missiology'.

A number of important studies have been published since then, such as Darrell Richard Jackson and Alessia Passarelli's *Mapping Migration, Mapping Churches' Responses—Europe Study*.<sup>26</sup> All studies stress the great opportunities available to us to learn about world evangelization in this new diasporal context. The studies agree on five distinctives of diasporas that make them important for missions: transnational connectivity; hospitality and a culture of welcome; focus on extended family; flexicurity; and biblical pattern.

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*Salafis* (Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2014).

21 Boyd, 'Family and Personal Networks'; Wolf-Dietrich Buckow, *Theologie vom Rand der Gesellschaft. Eine indische Vision* (Freiburg: Herder, 2000), 9ff.; Fernandez de la Hoz, *Familienleben*, 24.

22 Paloma Fernandez and Johannes Pfliegerl, 'Familie als Schlüssel zur Integration', in *Bundesministerium für Umwelt, Jugend und Familie, Zur Situation von Familie und Familienpolitik in Österreich—4. Österreichischer Familienbericht: Familie zwischen Anspruch und Alltag* (Vienna: Bundesministerium für Umwelt, Jugend und Familie, 1999), 364–81.

23 S. Hun Kim and Wonsuk Ma, eds., *Korean Diaspora and Christian Mission* (Oxford: Regnum, 2011), 1.

24 'The New People Next Door', Lausanne Occasional Paper 55 (2004), [https://www.lausanne.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/06/LOP55\\_IG26.pdf](https://www.lausanne.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/06/LOP55_IG26.pdf).

25 Kim and Ma, *Korean Diaspora*, 2.

26 Darrell Richard Jackson and Alessia Passarelli, *Mapping Migration, Mapping Churches' Responses—Europe Study* (Geneva: Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe, World Council of Churches, 2008); Jehu Hancilles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006).

### ***Transnational connectivity***

Diasporas exist across at least two borders: those of the sending and the receiving country. In most cases, a number of other countries, where migrants from the same country of origin live, are also included in a diasporal network. The Russian diaspora, for instance, is spread over all European and many Asian and North American countries. Similarly, the diaspora groups of Chinese, Koreans, Arabs, Armenians and others may be found all over the world. Most of them speak the vernacular languages of their countries of origin and share cultural and social values, dreams and longings. Their common origin defines the basic relationship of trust amongst them, which is so important for any evangelism and mission, as the American missiologist Marvin Mayers rightly claims.<sup>27</sup>

This transnational connectivity also defines the model for mission, largely eliminating issues of acculturation, since the target people in the mission field speak the same language and share the same cultural values, and yet at the same time they live fully integrated lives in their new homeland. Contextualization and inculturation of the gospel message become a less complicated matter. Chinese evangelize Chinese, Russians reach out to Russians, Arabs speak to Arabs. Those who have been evangelized in turn evangelize their fellow diaspora neighbours. By this means, long processes of missionary preparation become unnecessary.

### ***Hospitality and culture of welcome***

Diaspora groups are bound by the memory of their common home and shared culture, thus shaping a joint identity and generating a much higher level of inter-dependence on each other in their new homeland. One of the markers of contemporary diasporal communities is their culture of hospitality and sense of welcome, which they have no trouble in extending beyond their own people to neighbours in their host country.

Such a hospitality-driven social networking culture provides an ideal environment for the propagation of the gospel in an organic way. Hospitality was a key to the fast spread of the Gospel in the first century AD, and things are no different today. The correlation between a culture of welcome and effective evangelism has been thoroughly researched and established.<sup>28</sup>

### ***Extended families***

Diasporas develop around extended families and clans. Members of a given diasporal network are bound by extended family ties. In such networks, one readily feels accepted and at home. This seems to be another important key to evangelism, since the vast majority of people coming to faith in Christ do so via family networks. The family is obviously God's most important agent of mission.<sup>29</sup> Nowhere

27 Marvin Mayers, *Christianity Confronts Culture: A Strategy for Cross-Cultural Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 32.

28 Johannes Reimer, *Hereinspaziert: Willkommenskultur und Evangelisation* (Schwarzenfeld: Neufeld, 2013).

29 See Johannes Reimer, *Familie—Zukunft der Kirche. Zur Korrelation zwischen Familie und Mis-*

else does the gospel travel the world so naturally as through family structures. This made the private house (*oikos*) the main conduit and place for mission during the apostolic era.

### ***Flexicurity***

Diasporas are by definition multicultural. They derive their identity from their original home and seek to establish a new identity in their new home. To use a metaphor of roots and wings, they nourish their roots (from their previous world) and learn to fly in the new world. Sociology speaks of a culture of 'flexicurity' in which both flexibility and security seem equally important.<sup>30</sup> Bi-cultural people are like that: they value tradition but at the same time seek to change and adapt to the new conditions around them.

This culture of flexicurity enables diasporas to adapt to new religious convictions and become open to the gospel. The diasporas' religious receptivity makes them a priority for Christian mission.<sup>31</sup> We must also recognize that many members of diaspora groups are strong, mature Christians who have much to offer to the host country, in terms of both contextualization and interpretation. Their ability to switch cultural frames gives them a unique perspective on the gospel and Christian missions.

### ***Biblical pattern***

The gospel spread through the ancient world through the Jewish diasporas. Followers of Jesus dispersed from Jerusalem as a result of persecution and were soon preaching his message in all corners of the Roman Empire (Acts 8:1–8; 11:9ff). Paul and Barnabas are excellent examples of missionaries who used the existence of the diaspora to plant gospel seeds. Soon churches were established around the Jewish diasporas in many cities of the Roman Empire.<sup>32</sup> Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:2) and Apollos from Alexandria in Egypt (Acts 18:24–28) established a church in Ephesus using the diaspora. Without question, diasporic communities offered the most important starting point for Christian mission in the first century.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the practice of the ancient church might help us to orient modern-day missions to today's diaspora communities along similar lines.

## **Conclusion**

These factors underscore the importance of an intense, intentional focus on diasporal mission. The Western missionary movement and enterprise has a lot to learn from the diaspora and from how global people movements are forcing

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*sion* (Marburg: Francke), 2016.

30 Reimer, *Hereinspaziert*, 16–17.

31 'The New People Next Door'.

32 Robert Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962).

33 Craig Ott, 'Diaspora and Relocation as Divine Impetus for Witness in the Early Church', in Enoch Wan (ed.), *Diaspora Missiology: Theory, Methodology and Practice* (Portland, OR: Institute of Diaspora Studies, 2011), 101.

the church to rethink its approach to missions. Indeed, we are discovering that in an increasingly post-Christian and post-modern culture, the most effective 'sent ones' (i.e. missionaries) might be the members of the diaspora itself. This challenges our power- and privilege-based presupposition about missions being 'from the West to the rest' and moves us towards a more shared concept of missions. Consequently, we would do well to pay attention to the gift that God has given the church in the form of people on the move—today's unprecedented global diaspora—in the coming decades.

Appropriately, leaders of national evangelical alliances throughout the world have expressed a strong interest in diaspora mission. For most of them, the Lausanne initiatives have presented a perfect platform on which to act and shape diasporal mission. With the decision by the World Evangelical Alliance's leadership to form a Diaspora Task Force at the global level, working as closely as possible alongside the Lausanne Diaspora Network, a new phase in evangelical diasporal mission has begun.

We encourage regional and national alliances to create their own Diaspora Task Forces and promote this work as intensively as possible. A central leadership team, based in Toronto, Canada, has been formed to offer leadership in promoting and supporting diasporal ministries globally.