

Crossing the Divide: A Case Study of a Western Mission Agency's Encounter with Diaspora Missions

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In 2012 an Arab Egyptian Christian family residing in the United States applied to become missionaries with HBC, a mid-size US based Baptist denomination of over one thousand churches and 150 foreign missionaries.¹ Their story captures many of the key realities and issues that affect church and mission agency engagement with diaspora missions.

Samir and Miriam were born into Christian families in Egypt. After college they joined the staff of a large US-based mission organization that worked throughout the Middle East. For thirteen years they served in several different ministry positions in Egypt. In 2003 Samir was granted the opportunity for further theological education in the United States. Over the next decade he received a master's degree in theological studies from a well-known Evangelical graduate school and secured a teaching position in a small mid-western Evangelical college. The entire family, especially their three young children, adapted well to the American Evangelical sub-culture.

During their years in America, Samir and Miriam had opportunities to regularly return to Egypt and other Middle Eastern locations for ministry opportunities. Their involvement in evangelistic campaigns within both Christian and Muslim communities, theological training seminars, and compassion ministries increased during these years and accelerated with the dawning of the "Arab Spring" conflicts and the growing persecution of the Egyptian churches under the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Samir and Miriam desired to return to fulltime ministry among Egyptians, but their experience as immigrants shifted their ministry focus to the Egyptian diaspora, both throughout the Middle East and North America. Through the influence of Egyptian friends they approached HBC, applied, and were accepted as missionary appointees for Egypt and the Egyptian diaspora.

They chose to continue their primary residence in the United States. Their former public role in Egyptian ministry and the rising tide of persecution in Egypt, as well as the inclusion of the North American Egyptian diaspora in their ministry plan prompted this decision. The choice also included considerations of family welfare, both economic and emotional, especially since their children were acculturated to life in the US and not Egypt.

Their ministry plan includes working with HBC districts and churches in America to promote outreach to immigrant Muslim populations, as well as numerous trips to network and train Egyptian Christians who are living and working throughout the Middle East. Their goal is to prepare Egyptians in the diaspora to evangelize Egyptians and the other unreached immigrant peoples among whom they live and work.

At this stage their story is illustrative of many well-known diaspora realities. Samir and Miriam fit the largest demographic of the global diaspora, those migrating to locations of increased opportunity (Goldin et al 2011, chp. 4) which in their case was from Egypt to the United States for education and employment. They also portray the fact that a largest percentage of those on the move are Christians. (Pew 2012, 11) They are also an example of those who are encouraged to migrate, either initially or to

¹ All persons and ministries described in the study are real, but with altered names.

remain abroad, because of religious persecution. A final reality is their experience of transnationalism and its effect upon family and ministry.

The Need for Deep Change

As an immigrant family Samir and Miriam's personal and ministry profile is very different from the typical American HBC missionary. The agency's desire to engage in diaspora missions has occasioned a critical examination of the agency's ministry philosophy, values, and organizational structure. There is a growing recognition among agency leadership that effective engagement with the global diaspora requires deep change throughout the organization.

To address the need for deep change, the position of Director of Diaspora Ministries was created within the International Ministries department of HBC. The director was given responsibility to determine the conceptual, methodological, and organizational challenges within HBC International Ministries that hinder engagement with people on the move, and to make recommendations for change.

Affinity Focus

The first recommendation for change was organizational. As other sending agencies have learned, reliance on a geographic field structure is counter-productive for diaspora missions. In a traditional mission field the organizational structure for ministry, resources, and accountability is coterminous with the geographical boundaries of the target people's cultural homeland. But this structure becomes a hindrance when the target people group is enlarged to include those who have emigrated from their homeland to other areas.²

HBC has begun to experiment with an affinity focus structure for some of its target Unreached People Groups (UPG). Intentionally vague in definition, an affinity group for HBC denotes a cluster of target peoples who share relevant characteristics, such as Arab Muslims. An affinity focus allows HCB to network all missionaries working with the same larger affinity group, even though they target distinct UPGs and are in different countries. Even HCB missionaries working with people groups completely outside of the affinity block are brought into the network if applicable. For example, missionaries in the Philippines may have some connections to the Arab Muslim affinity group because of the large number of Christian Filipino overseas workers in the Middle East and Europe. Planning, oversight, and resourcing is beginning to move away from distinct geographic fields to larger regional structures. More than one affinity block may fall under the supervision of a regional director. An affinity focus eliminates the distinction between US-based and foreign-based missionaries who are working with the same unreached people group. <http://www.imb.org/globalresearch/maps/AffinityGroupOverview.pdf>

This newer structure is reflected in Samir and Miriam's ministry plan in which they work with Egyptians in three distinct areas—the United States, throughout the Middle East, and Egypt. At present they are accountable to Diaspora Ministries, and not a geographic field.

² The International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention is an example of a mission agency that has moved away from a traditional field structure to an affinity focus. The IMB affinity structure and the reasons for its adoption are discussed in two reports published in 2009, available from [imb.org](http://www.imb.org). The reports are *To the Ends of the Earth* (accessed at <http://media1.imbresources.org/files/103/10333/10333-55180.pdf>), and *Affinity Group Overview* (accessed at <http://www.imb.org/globalresearch/maps/AffinityGroupOverview.pdf>.)

Majority World Focus

Two of the diaspora realities described above--the predominance of Majority World peoples in the global diaspora, and the significant presence of Majority World Christians on the move-- impinge directly upon conceptual and methodological challenges that HBC faces.

Western mission agencies are accustomed to being in the driver's seat. In the past agencies typically initiated mission strategies following Western planning models, staffed these strategies with Western personnel, and created funding streams from Western sources. This model breaks down in the global diaspora.

Like Samir and Miriam, the vast majority of people on the move are not from Western countries. diaspora missions has not arisen from the strategic planning of Western agencies. The rise of diaspora missions coincides with the seismic shifts that have occurred throughout world missions. The Majority World church is emerging as the dominant player in evangelizing the unreached peoples of the world. More than ever before the fulfillment of the Great Commission is powered by movements of Christian lay persons seeking secular work throughout the globe. These informal, Majority World missionaries are the emerging face of world missions.

The greatest potential for diaspora missions is not within the ranks of career missionaries, but in the millions of Majority World lay Christians on the move. The ministry priority of HBC missionaries involved with diaspora missions, such as Samir and Miriam, is to mobilize and equip Christians in the diaspora.

As HBC attempts to focus on the mission potential of Majority World lay Christians scattered among the nations, it encounters challenges concerning past methods. HBC has a long history of involvement in leadership development. But the target audience for training has remained centered on full-time, vocational ministry, whether as pastor or missionary. The preponderance of this training has occurred in formal education programs at Bible colleges and seminaries around the world. Since the vast majority of Christians in the global diaspora will not attend these schools, local churches must become the focus of mobilization and training. This church-based missions program includes mobilization, training, and on-going accountability and care of overseas workers. It occurs first in the sending church in the worker's homeland, and continues in the new church in the diaspora.

Whether the goal for current HBC missionaries is to train Filipinos living in Hong Kong or West Africans residing in France or Brazilians finding work in North Africa, all of these diasporic groups have in common the need for discipleship and training in cross-cultural evangelism. But they also share the inability to access most of the present training venues offered by the agency. Most of these overseas laborers do not have the inclination or time to pursue the types of career-oriented theological and ministry training now offered by HBC schools. Often they are pushed into these global labor flows by poverty, natural disaster, or oppression in the home country and lack funding for extensive theological training. The bottom line is that they rarely see themselves as potential missionaries, and therefore have little desire or ability to seek formal training. While mission agencies and schools can provide materials, seminars, and online resources, mobilization and training must be centered in the local churches of the Majority World.

HBC missionaries can help to create new training resources that are adjusted to the learning level and interest of Majority World lay persons, and create church-based delivery systems. These things must

be done in cooperation with Majority World local churches and denominations. As HBC missionaries, Samir and Miriam are tasked with developing this type of training structure for the Egyptian diaspora. Being part of the Egyptian diaspora is a definite asset.

Partnership Focus

However, beyond changing particular ministry methods is the question is HBC, and other Western mission agencies, willing to embrace the type of deep change required for diaspora missions effectiveness? Samir and Miriam's presence in the mission force of HBC raises this yet unanswered question. While the concept of partnership between Western and Majority World missions is quite familiar, the realities of diaspora missions calls for increased levels of genuine cooperation. Since the global diaspora is primarily a Majority World experience, the Western mission agency enters as learner into this new realm.

HBC's desire for greater cooperation with Majority World mission forces is expressed primarily at two levels. First is the desire to see more Samirs and Miriams become part of the International Ministry staff. The second level is to seek a servant's role in working with Majority World churches and denominations as they deploy their diaspora mission forces.

The realization of the first goal, to increase the number of HBC career missionaries recruited from the diaspora, has uncovered difficulties inherent in mission partnerships. The experience of Samir and Miriam has revealed HBC organizational values and structures that hinder missionaries from non-Western cultures. HBC has not been successful in funding missionary appointees from the global diaspora. Many International Mission staff and US-based church planters recruited from immigrant groups have been unable to raise sufficient funds to meet the agency requirements.

This failure has led to an examination of agency values and organizational structures. HBC places a high value on individual initiative and entrepreneurship. The Ministry Partner Development (MPD) process is seen as an indicator of later success on the mission field. It is believed that the same traits of individual initiative and perseverance needed for support-raising are also needed for future ministry success on the field. But these agency values are at times in conflict with the more collaborative and communal cultural norms of the non-Western missionaries that are being recruited.

Perhaps at its deepest level HBC's experience of bringing on non-Western staff reveals a hidden cultural prejudice—the belief that the Western planning and management patterns used by HBC and most other agencies in North America are the “correct” way to do missions. For HBC genuine partnership in diaspora missions will only occur when the agency is willing to experience the difficulties of negotiating with non-Western staff and its Majority World church partners a new operating paradigm that creates space for other cultural values and methods.

In the funding area, HBC has recognized two possible solutions. One is to continue the present system and expect mission personnel recruited from within the global diaspora to adapt to Western values and methods. The second option is for the agency to expand the number and types of Ministry Partner Development paradigms that it uses, and to allow differing compensation packages to be more inclusive of other cultures. The agency's temptation is to pick the first option because the status quo is easier than change. Fortunately HBC International Ministries has resisted taking the easy option and instead has established an MPD study group to identify alternative funding pathways.

The second level of seeking genuine partnership with Majority World churches in diaspora missions is the acceptance of a servant's role. The local churches and denominations in the Global South and East are the directors of this new mission drama. The players are the informal missionaries who have been scattered among the unreached peoples of the earth. The HBC missionary force, like the stage crew in a theater, must find the places where it can enable the primary actors and add value to the performance. God, of course, has written the script and set the transnational flows of people into motion.

As discussed above, a tangible expression of this service role is the reconfiguration of the content and delivery of HBC training resources to fit the church-based and lay person orientation of diaspora missions. Training resources need to be developed in partnership with those in the diaspora because there are important characteristics common to migrating peoples that renders diaspora missions different from missions to sedentary people. For example, migrating people often develop a transnational identity, especially children in the diaspora. Those who have experienced the blending of cultural viewpoints, such as Samir and Miriam, have an advantage in creating relevant resources for discipleship and evangelism.

Focus on Suffering

Another important feature of global migration is the high degree of suffering that often accompanies those on the move. Similar to the persecution Samir and Miriam encountered, there are negative forces that propel and keep people in the diaspora. Unemployment and underemployment, natural disaster, political conflict, prejudice, or various types of oppression drive others out of their homelands. Upon arriving in their new country, workers from the Majority World often find themselves near the bottom of the social and economic ladder, vulnerable and many times abused. Some, like Samir and Miriam, are able to keep the family together in their journeys, but millions of overseas workers are separated from family for years.

A profound sense of dislocation is a constant companion for many. Others experience loneliness and guilt for leaving spouses and children. Unresolved conflicts such as these can prompt destructive behaviors that negatively affect the discipleship process. (Baxter 2009, 117) If HBC had any misgivings concerning the appropriateness of holistic missions, these doubts fall away in the face of diaspora realities. HBC has recognized the necessity of holistic care for people on the move. The social and emotional dysfunctions inherent in the present patterns of global migration must be addressed in order for Christians in the diaspora to be effective ambassadors for Christ, first to their fellow countrymen on the move, and then to the unreached peoples among whom they live and work. The challenge for HBC is to learn from those in the diaspora, such as Samir and Miriam, how to be wise partners with the Majority World churches in providing care to people on the move.

Summary

In its mission endeavors that are relevant to the global diaspora, HBC is experiencing change. As the agency recognizes relevant issues and realities concerning the global diaspora, and as it grows through the experience of working alongside of people from the diaspora, such as Samir and Miriam, HBC International Missions is changing in the following ways to better take advantage of mission opportunities among people on the move:

1. Reorienting organizational structures away from geography and toward an affinity focus. Missions from everywhere to everywhere.

2. Affirming the primacy of the Majority World church in the completion of the Great Commission.
3. Increasing commitment to genuine partnerships with Majority World churches, denominations, and mission agencies.
4. Evaluating sources of cultural prejudice in HBC mission values, methods and structures.
5. Prioritizing the Diaspora Reaching the Diaspora.
6. Creating pathways to recruit and fund HBC missionaries from within the global diaspora.
7. Shifting the focus of theological and ministry education away from formal programs for professional clergy towards church-based training programs for overseas, secular workers.
8. Providing holistic care as an essential component of diaspora missions.

Works Cited

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