

Mission By and Beyond the Diaspora,
Partnering with diaspora believers to reach other immigrants and the local people

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Introduction

Ours is an age of massive movements of people around the earth. Patrick Johnstone estimates that there are 191 million migrants currently and that that number may grow by another 170 million by 2050.¹ People are on the move for a variety of reasons. Some move voluntarily; others move because it is not safe or possible to live where they were. As believers we believe that God uses movements of this type for his purposes. Professor Craig Ott writes, “This sovereign working of God in human history and the movement of peoples we find to be a means of God spreading His glory among all people and preparing people to receive that message.”² Diaspora missiology is based on the desire to understand what God is doing through these movements and to take advantage of the opportunities presented to us.

Enoch Wan in his book *Diaspora Missiology: Theory, Methodology, and Practice* identifies three types of diaspora missions:

1. Missions to the diaspora: reaching the diaspora groups themselves,
2. Missions through the diaspora: diaspora Christians reaching out to their kinsmen wherever they are,
3. Missions by and beyond the diaspora: motivating and mobilizing diaspora Christians for cross-cultural missions.³

Much of the focus of diaspora missiology is on the first category – Missions to the diaspora. We have great opportunities for ministry when people move from countries where there is little freedom to present the Gospel to other countries that have no such limitations. For example, there is greater freedom to evangelize Moroccans in Spain, Turks in Germany, and Chinese in South Africa than in their home countries. I attended the Consultation on the Diaspora Peoples of Europe in September of 2013, and the majority of the presentations and the bulk of the discussion were on missions to the diaspora peoples in Europe. It is appropriate to focus on this ministry as it gives us the unique opportunity to reach people who are unlikely to be reached in their home countries. It is legal and less dangerous to approach them in open countries, and they also tend to be more receptive to spiritual matters in a new environment.⁴ In addition, ministry

1 Patrick Johnstone, *Future of the Global Church*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, Inc, 2011), 4

2 Craig Ott, “Diaspora and Relocation as Divine Impetus for Witness in the Early Church.” In *Diaspora Missiology: Theory, Methodology, and Practice*, ed. Enoch Wan (Portland, OR: Institute of Diaspora Studies, 2011), 75

3 Enoch Wan, “Introduction.” In *Diaspora Missiology: Theory, Methodology, and Practice*, ed. Enoch Wan (Portland, OR: Institute of Diaspora Studies, 2011), 5

4 Enoch Wan, “The Phenomenon of Diaspora.” In *Diaspora Missiology: Theory, Methodology, and Practice*, ed. Enoch Wan (Portland, OR: Institute of Diaspora Studies, 2011), 13

to diaspora peoples can and often does lead the second type of diaspora ministry - Christians in those groups ministering to their people in other locations.

This paper goes a step further and deals with the third category – Mission by and beyond the diaspora. In it I explore the potential for and experience of diaspora Christians in impacting people of other ethnic groups for Christ. For this purpose I draw on my studies, on my experience as a missionary in Romania from 1996 to 2008 with OC International, and my role as OC’s Europe Area Director since that time.

Thesis statement

It is my belief that diaspora believers and diaspora churches can and should be a major force in world missions by reaching not only the populations among whom they live but also reaching other immigrant people groups in the same locality. A Lausanne publication on diaspora ministry boldly states, “Christian believers in diaspora...are one of the most strategic ‘missionary’ forces in the history of missions...evangelizing members of the host society and other ethnic groups in their context.”⁵ Ed Silvano adds “According to the Bible, every time that God chose to bless and transform a powerful nation, He used foreigners and immigrants – Joseph, Daniela, Esther, Paul, etc.”⁶ My hope is that diaspora believers around the world will come to realize that their new homes are mission fields and that they have an opportunity and the responsibility to make a difference there – and will do so.

The general pattern of church planting among diaspora groups

In many diaspora groups there are very few believers - for example migrants from the Middle East and from the Buddhist and Hindu lands of Asia. By contrast, other diaspora groups contain a significant number of believers. Examples are diasporas from Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe, and parts of Asia such as the Philippines and China. When these believers settle in their new locations, they typically gather together for mutual support and fellowship. Often they form churches which cater to members of their specific groups, using the language and worship styles from their home countries. In some cases the rejection or lack of welcome by the existing local churches has also motivated them to start their own churches.⁷ In large cities there can be large numbers of diaspora churches. Samuel Cueva wrote in 2010 that

5 Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, *Scattered to Gather: Embracing the Global Trend of Diaspora* (Manila: LifeChange Publishing, 2010), 27

6 Ed Silvano, testimonial in *Blessed Migrants*, by Samuel Lee (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2008), ix

7 Mark Sturge, *Look What the Lord Has Done, An Exploration of Black Christian Faith in Britain* (Queensway, England: Scripture Union, 2005), 42

there were at least seventy registered Latin American churches in Barcelona!⁸ The planting of diaspora churches can also result in a dizzying variety of churches in an area. A Baptist study in Germany in 2005 found 210 international Baptist churches formed in very diverse communities including Russian, Ghanaian, Congolese, Tamil, Vietnamese, and Iranian.⁹ Hans Lund estimates that there are 7,000 immigrant churches just in Europe.¹⁰ There are, of course, thousands of ethnic churches in the US – Hispanic, Korean, Chinese, and Romanian, to name a few. Whether they know it or not, these churches form part of the harvest force where they are.

Challenges to cross-cultural impact

The problem is that these churches are often ineffective in impacting people from other cultures. Writing about Korean churches in their diaspora Minho Song says, “In most diaspora Korean churches, the *apostolic* dimension of the church is either weak or missing.”¹¹ Similarly, Kim-Kong Chan writing of the Chinese diaspora states, “The current growth in the Chinese diaspora communities seems to be more of a target for mission to the diaspora and mission through the diaspora but has not reached the potential of ‘mission by and beyond the diaspora.’”¹² This is true of many diaspora churches. There are several reasons why these diaspora churches may have little impact on other local populations.

- The cultural factors that bind the diaspora group together often separate them from the local people. Song continues, “Finding themselves aliens and sojourners in a new setting, diaspora Christians have the natural tendency to stay amongst themselves because they find comfort and a sense of belonging to their kind. This homogeneous pull brings and binds them together, but ultimately bans them from meaningfully participating in the lives of those who are outside of the group.”¹³

8 Samuel Cueva, “Mission, Missionaries and the Evangelization of Europe,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 34,4 (Oct 2010), 9, accessed April 4, 2014, <http://www.back2europe.org/getattachment/7af255e3-a83b-4e38-8098-c2ba12978547/Resource-2.aspx>

9 Michael Kisskalt, “Immigrant Churches in the German Baptist Union,” in *Ethnic Churches in Europe, A Baptist Response*, ed. Peter F. Penner, (Prague: International Baptist Theological Seminary, 2006), 189

10 Hans Lund, “Migrant Churches in Europe,” (presentation at the Diaspora Consultation, Amsterdam, September 24-25, 2013).

11 Minho Song, “The Diaspora Experience of the Korean Church and its Implications for World Missions,” in *Korean Diaspora and Christian Mission*, eds. S. Hun Kim and Wonsuk Ma. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 125

12 Kim-Kong Chan, “Chapter 14, Case Study 2: Missiological Implications of Chinese Christians in Diaspora,” in *Diaspora Missiology: Theory, Methodology, and Practice*, ed. Enoch Wan. (Portland, OR: Institute of Diaspora Studies, 2011), 193

13 Minho Song, “The Diaspora Experience of the Korean Church and its Implications for World Missions,” 125-6

- Believers in a diaspora group tend to focus on evangelizing and discipling the people within their cultural group. They feel an obligation to do so, and relating to their own group is much easier than relating cross-culturally to other people groups.
- Another major reason is unfamiliarity with the local language. Most people hesitate to express themselves when they know that they cannot speak a language well. And the local speakers of the language may have little tolerance for those who speak it poorly. When diaspora believers have a group or church in which they use their native language extensively, it actually slows down their progress with the language of the host culture.
- Since most diaspora churches use only their native language for their worship services, it is unlikely that local people would attend and participate in those services.
- Unfamiliarity with the local culture is another barrier. The newcomers lack the social cues to know when and how it is appropriate to enter into a conversation about spiritual things. I once read a book about British culture that stated strongly that bringing up religion in conversation is a major social mistake there. People who are used to sharing their faith openly in their home culture would not necessarily know this.
- Often the cultural gap between the local people and the diaspora people results in prejudice of one by the other. An example is the case for Romanians living in Western Europe. Professor Christina Ilie writes, “Unfortunately the Spanish public perception of Romanian immigrants is not [a] very good one, as they are seen as the most disagreeable group of [immigrants].”¹⁴ It is a challenge for people with a lower social standing to influence those of higher standing, but it is not impossible. Paul rejoices (1 Corinthians 1:27-8) over the fact that God chooses humble people and uses them mightily. There are many stories, for example, of how Filipina housemaids have led whole households to the Lord in various countries.
- The style of worship used in diaspora churches may be considered strange to the local people. Many diaspora groups are used to enthusiastic worship and to lengthy services. It is hard for people who are used to formal and shorter services to adjust to different worship patterns.
- Often the local believers and their churches do little to connect with or encourage the churches of diaspora believers. This is largely due to cultural and linguistic differences,

14 Cristina Ilie, “Criminality Among Romanian Emigrants in Spain,” *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 4, 3 (March 2014): 509, accessed April 3, 2014, http://hrmars.com/hrmars_papers/Criminality_among_Romanian_Emigrants_in_Spain.pdf

but often the people in the host culture simply don't "see" the other churches and believers.

- Even when the diaspora group and the host society use the same language, the connection is not always easy. For example, the evangelical churches in the Basque area of Spain often have a majority of members from Latin America rather than from Spain. As a result, the services resemble those in Latin America. Spaniards visiting the service can understand the language but may determine that those churches are not for them.

Potential for impact

In spite of these difficulties, Christian diaspora communities have a great potential to impact members of their host society as well as members of other diaspora groups. *Scattered to Gather*, a publication of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, points out four advantages which believing diaspora communities have over traditional missionaries: they require no missionary visas, need no expensive international travel (since they are already there), face no political restrictions, and face few closed doors.¹⁵ Samuel Lee adds "...once the migrant understands the purpose of God in his or her life, then God releases authority and power to that person to act in that land....migrants in their nation are potential blessings and the key to revival in the hosting land."¹⁶

In addition to large numbers of people immigrating to other countries, another major world trend is the growth of the missions movement in the majority world (global south). As churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America grow in their vision and heart for cross-cultural missions, so do their communities in the diaspora. Often pastors are called from the home country to lead churches in the diaspora. Sometimes missionaries are also sent to work with and within the diaspora communities.

Positive signs and examples

In spite of the difficulties, there are good examples in which the diaspora church has had an impact on the local population.

- Samuel Lee reports effective ministries by Indonesians and Surinamese among the Dutch in Holland, Nigerians with British people, and Koreans with the local people of Japan and Germany.¹⁷

15 Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, *Scattered to Gather*, 10

16 Samuel Lee, *Blessed Migrants, God's Strategy for Global Revival* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2008), 11

17 Samuel Lee, *Blessed Migrants*, 24-5, 69

- Kingsway International Christian Centre in England is a black majority mega-church with a Nigerian pastor. It is the vision of KICC “to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with the 11 million people resident in London.”¹⁸
- Overseas Filipino workers are well known for their zeal and effectiveness in communicating Christ wherever they are. The goal of the Philippines Missions Association and the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches was to have 200,000 tentmaking missionaries by 2010 as part of their diaspora.¹⁹
- A Romanian Pentecostal church in Barcelona has a missions committee tasked to find ways to reach Spanish people.
- A Romanian believer in Spain opened a youth club as a ministry to Spanish young people.
- The Youngnak Korean Presbyterian Church of Toronto has helped Thai and Myanmar leaders plant churches for believers in their own immigrant groups.
- A Chinese church in Bucharest supports a local orphanage.

A wonderful opportunity – mission to other diaspora groups

Diaspora believers and their churches have a wonderful opportunity to reach out to other groups of immigrants. Pastor Cody Lorance borrows descriptors from anthropologist Miriam Adeney²⁰ saying, “These ‘liminal, hyphenated, polycentric, multilingual Christians’ are the natural ‘bridge-builders’ who can effectively lead in cross-cultural mission endeavors to other diaspora communities.”²¹ They share the experience of struggling to adjust to a new situation and culture. They share the burdens of learning languages and of not being fully accepted by the host society. The diaspora believers can assist the non-Christian immigrants in a host of practical ways, showing them what they have done to “make it” in their new homes. The diaspora believers also have the opportunity to show the non-Christians immigrants what a

18 Kingsway International Christian Centre, “The KICC Vision,” accessed April 3, 2014, <http://www.kicc.org.uk/Church/Vision/tabid/45/Default.aspx>

19 Robert F.K. Lopez, “The Philippine Missions Association (PMA) Tentmaking Agenda: Raising an Army of Outstanding Filipino Witnesses,” in *Scattered: The Filipino Global Presence*. eds. Luis Pantoja, Jr., Sadiri Joy Tira, and Enoch Wan, (Manila: Lifechange Publishing Inc., 2004), 197

20 Miriam Adeney, “Colorful Initiatives, North American Diasporas in Mission.” *Missiology: An International Review* 39, 1, (January 2011): 7, accessed April 3, 2014, <http://mis.sagepub.com/content/39/1/5.full.pdf>

21 Cody C. Lorance, “Chapter 19 - Case Study 7: Reflections of a Church Planter among Diaspora Groups in Metro-Chicago: Pursuing Cruciformity in Diaspora Missions,” in *Diaspora Missiology: Theory, Methodology, and Practice*, ed. Enoch Wan (Portland, OR: Institute of Diaspora Studies, 2011) 275

true, vibrant Christianity looks like. In many countries of Europe non-Christian immigrants are more likely to meet a believer from another part of the world than from the country where they are living! Local churches often do not have the energy or passion to reach the non-Christian immigrants, so it is important that the believing immigrants attempt to do so.

What should diaspora believers and their churches do?

1. Realize that they are on a mission field. Every country is a mission field in the sense that there are always people who need the Lord and places that need churches. However, diaspora believers often find themselves in countries where the spiritual condition is worse than the countries from which they come. This can motivate the migrants to active and effective ministry.
2. To the extent that the diaspora group has been oppressed by the host culture either at home or in the host country, the diaspora believers need to forgive those offenses and love their new neighbors for the sake of the Gospel.
3. Pray for the people and churches of the host society. God told the Jewish diaspora through Jeremiah, “Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” If diaspora believers pray fervently and consistently for the country, those prayers will have a significant impact.
4. Prepare the people to interact well with the people of the local culture and encourage them to do so. Part of this process is to encourage people to work hard to learn the local language.
5. Engage in community activities, including (but not limited to) church-sponsored events and fellowships of Christian leaders.
6. Consider offering a bi-lingual service or planting a church using the local language.
7. Partner with churches within other diaspora communities.

What can the indigenous churches do to assist the diaspora people and churches?

Quoting an article from Orientdienst, a German mission agency, Jimmy Martin outlines four options churches have for engaging with immigrant believers. Those are: integrating immigrants fully into existing churches, sharing facilities with immigrant congregations, assisting immigrant believers to form their own independent churches, and lastly developing multi-cultural churches

which can integrate people from many cultures.²² In addition to those options indigenous churches can do the following:

1. Offer practical support to the immigrant population – for example assisting in language learning, finding jobs, finding housing, and helping with justice issues.
2. Fellowship with people from diaspora churches and hold joint worship services.
3. Include the newcomers in social and evangelistic projects.
4. Connect with and encourage their leaders.
5. Seek to learn from them.
6. Assist in planting ethnic and multi-ethnic churches. For example, the Rocky Mountain District of the Evangelical Free Church recently hired a Director of Ethnic Church Planting and Development to assist diaspora groups in this way.

What can the churches in the diaspora group's homeland do?

It is often discouraging for church leaders to see their people emigrate. Pastors don't like to lose their members and especially their leaders. Rather than resent the departure of their people, church leaders can inspire and equip them to be tent-making missionaries in the places to which they are going. In the Philippines, the Philippine Missions Mobilization Movement encourages believers who are emigrating to be prepared to be effective witnesses in their new environment. They have developed a number of training materials,²³ and a website (www.farfromhome.info) has been established to provide additional training materials.

Greater opportunities with later generations

The first generation to move to a new place will always have the hardest time adjusting and may have a harder time having a spiritual impact on the local people. The situation is quite different for later generations. As children grow up in the new environment and go to school, they become proficient in the local language and much more in tune with the host society. They are then better equipped to minister to the people around them. Michael Kisskalt writes "They are an important group in the process of integration and can help by being a bridge not only in the society but also between local and immigrant churches."²⁴ It is important for church leaders

22 Jimmy Martin, "International and Multiethnic Churches," in *Ethnic Churches in Europe, A Baptist Response*, ed. Peter F. Penner, (Prague: International Baptist Theological Seminary, 2006) 156-7

23 Jojo Manzano and Joy C. Solina eds, *Worker to Witness, Becoming an OFW Tentmaker*, (Makati City, Philippines: Church Strengthening Ministry, 2007)

24 Michael Kisskalt, "Cross-cultural Learning: Issues of the Second Generation of Immigrant Churches," 120

to help young people maintain their religious fervor and desire to evangelize the people around them. The people in these later generations may choose to join the churches of the host culture. That can be a challenge to the diaspora churches in which they were raised, but it can be a great blessing to the local churches.

Ministry through and beyond the diaspora vs. Reverse Missions

People groups are on the move for many reasons. Increasingly believers are moving to new places with ministry as part of their motivation. As a result, the dividing line between “missionary” and “migrant” is becoming blurred. Reverse Missions is defined as “those from the former mission fields such as Africa, the Caribbean, Asia and South America sending missionaries and engaging in cross-cultural mission to the Western world.”²⁵ The people engaged in Reverse Missions are often part of diaspora groups, and they can lead those groups in effective cross-cultural ministry.

Consider these examples.

- Ike Nwaobasi, a Nigerian missionary with the Deeper Life Christian Church, learned German and planted three churches in Austria in which most of the worshipers were Austrian. Ike talks enthusiastically about his “piano strategy.” He says it takes the black keys and the white keys on a piano to make beautiful music, and it takes white and black people together to make a beautiful church. His goal was to plant churches for the Austrians, and to a large extent he succeeded.
- Rev. Israel Olofinjana is a Nigerian pastor serving in a Baptist church in London. He has become well known for his advocacy of “Reverse Mission.” In *Turning the Tables on Mission* Rev. Olofinjana includes the stories of 11 key people who have come from the global south to minister in the UK. These people can be considered members of diaspora groups, but their primary motive for immigrating to the UK is to do mission. He has recently established the Centre for Missionaries from the Majority World (<http://www.cmmw.org>) to offer training and encouragement to cross-cultural workers.
- Rev. Jesus Londono has a similar vision which he calls Back to Europe. The main purposes of Back to Europe are to raise awareness of Europe as a mission field and to mobilize the church around the world toward Europe.²⁶ The concept of Back to Europe is that the countries which once received missionaries from Europe are now capable of

25 Israel Olofinjana, , “Chapter One, Introduction,” in *Turning the Tables on Mission*, ed. Israel Olofinjana (Watford, UK: Instant Apostle, 2013), 25

26 Back to Europe, “Main Purposes of B2E”, accessed April 3, 2014, <http://www.back2europe.org/About-Us/Additional-information.aspx>

sending missionaries to Europe. Those are the same countries that have significant diaspora groups in Europe already.

Case study – Romania Diaspora ministry

During the time that my wife and I served as missionaries with OC International in Romania we heard more and more about the flight of Romanians to Western Europe. Even though Communism had fallen several years before, economic conditions in Romania were still tough for many people. Romania's links with the European Union created the possibility for many Romanians to emigrate to Western Europe in search of financial gain. Many worked as laborers, doing work that Spaniards no longer wanted to do.

In places where the Romanians gathered they often started churches. Those churches became centers for social interaction as well as religious expression. Often trained pastors emigrated to lead these churches. Over time several of these Romanian language churches grew to become the largest evangelical churches in the cities in which they were located! Training organizations based in Romania sent teachers to equip the believers in these congregations. The Romanian Pentecostal Church opened a seminary near Madrid, Spain; and at one time it had 120 students²⁷, nearly as many students as the seminary in Bucharest!

We received reports that Spanish pastors were delighted that Romanians were planting churches and even that some saw the Romanian churches as the fulfillment of prophecy. In some cases Spanish people have attended Romanian worship services. Some small groups were formed with Romanians and Spanish people together. At least one Romanian church in Spain had a committee tasked with finding ways to impact the Spanish people.

During the same period, interest in cross-cultural missions was growing rapidly in Romania. Romanian missionaries were being sent out to places like China, India, North Africa, and Peru. The Kairos missions course (www.kairoscourse.org) was being used widely to introduce churches and individuals to missions, and some short-term missions efforts were organized. Kairos courses have also been taught in Romanian churches in Spain and Italy.

These developments generated a significant potential for Romanian believers to impact societies in Western Europe. Through extensive nationwide research our team determined that evangelicals comprised approximately 2% of the Romanian population,²⁸ significantly exceeding the percentage in most Western European countries. At the time it was estimated that there were a million Romanians living in Spain. Using the 2% figure, we can then estimate that there

27 Costel Grămadă, "Festivitate la Seminarul Biblic 'Emmanuel' din Arganda del Rey, Spania," *Cuvântul Adevărului*, January 2006

28 OC International and Misiunea Mondială Unită, *God's Heart for Romania* (Bucharest, Romania: 2001), 3

were 20,000 evangelical Romanian believers in Spain. The 2001 edition of *Operation World* estimated the evangelical population of Spain to be 174,000.²⁹ Therefore, the Romanian evangelicals may have comprised 11% of the country's total. C. Peter Wagner has estimated that 10% of believers have the gift of evangelism.³⁰ If even 5% of the Romanian believers in Spain had that gift, that meant that there were 1,000 gifted Romanian evangelists in Spain – a significant addition to the harvest force already there!

Need for more study

As we have seen, it can be quite a challenge for diaspora believers to make a spiritual impact on the local people among whom they live. Good examples are few. Rev. Isreal Olofinjana's book *Turning the Tables on Mission* tells the stories of eleven leaders from the global south who are ministering in the United Kingdom.³¹ While those individuals have had some impact on some British people, they are primarily working in multi-ethnic churches or in churches of their own culture. Enoch Wan includes eight case studies in his book *Diaspora Missiology*, but all of them deal primarily with missions to or through the diaspora. More examples of mission by and beyond the diaspora need to be found and publicized as an encouragement to the thousands of diaspora churches around the world.

Conclusion

It is clear that there is great potential in mission by and beyond the diaspora. However, the potential is largely waiting to be realized. Those people in diaspora communities need to seek ways to impact their host cultures and other immigrant communities. Those of us in host societies can minister to diaspora groups and seek to instill in them a vision for missions through, by, and beyond their communities.

29 Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandrick. *Operation World* (Milton Keynes, UK: Authentic Media, 2001), 583

30 C. Peter Wagner, *Your Spiritual Gifts Can Help Your Church Grow* (Venture, CA, Regal Books, 1980), 177

31 Israel Olofinjana ed., *Turning the Tables on Mission* (Watford, UK: Instant Apostle, 2013)

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