

Immigrants in the US: A Missional Opportunity



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The U.S. is undergoing what may prove to be the greatest demographic shift in its history, and the church is facing a pivotal decision in how it will respond to this change.

Will it respond in fear and view the change as a threat, or will it recognize the incredible missional and transformational opportunity this change provides for the church in the expansion of Christ's kingdom?

For Christians who participate in God's redemptive purposes, the migration of people, whether forced or voluntary, should be viewed not as accidental but part of God's sovereign plan. God determines the exact times and places where people live "so that they would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him" (Acts 17:27). We are called to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19); with immigration, the nations show up on our doorstep. The mission field has crossed our borders and settled into our communities as our co-workers and neighbors.

Missiologists around the world recognize that God is drawing people to Himself through ministry to, through, and beyond diaspora communities. Immigrants who are coming to the U.S. are not just open to hearing the gospel but are themselves transforming the Christian landscape in the U.S. This article explores current realities of immigrants in the U.S., theological reflections of the movement of people and the church's response, and the multi-faceted opportunities that immigration provides in expanding God's kingdom.

U.S. IMMIGRATION BACKGROUND

Over the past ten years, the U.S. has seen an unprecedented number of immigrants coming to its shores. Out of a total population of 309.3 million people, an estimated 39.9 million are immigrants (13%) (17.4 million of whom are naturalized U.S. citizens).² In 2011, there were of a total of 1,062,040 persons granted legal permanent resident status. 481,948 of them (45.4%) were new arrivals.³ Although the U.S. ranks 26th in the percentage of residents who were born abroad

compared to 159 countries (with populations of 1 million or more), in terms of sheer numbers, the U.S. receives more immigrants than any other country.⁴

This is resulting in more dramatic demographic and cultural shifts than the U.S. has experienced in past generations. Beyond European, Latino, and Asian immigrants, recent immigration demographics include large numbers of immigrants from "non-traditional" linguistic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Cities like Detroit, Michigan, and Minneapolis, Minnesota, boast significant numbers of Iraqis and Somalis, respectively, outside their countries of origin." At the Times Square Church in New York City, there are over 100 nationalities represented.⁵ The University of Southern California in 2010 had 6,944 international students from 116 different places of origin.⁶ The U.S. is now the home of immigrants from nearly every country in the world.⁷

This shift is no longer just happening in the traditional "Gateway Cities" of the U.S. like New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, but in more rural areas like South Carolina, Idaho, and Ohio. In the last decade, for example, Stafford County, Virginia, saw its immigrant population nearly triple, and the foreign-born population in Newton County, in central Georgia outside Atlanta, quadrupled.⁸ From 1990 to 2009 the foreign-born population of the small Midwestern meatpacking town Beardstown, Illinois grew from 0.7 percent to 17.3 percent.⁹ In July 2011, for the first time in U.S. history, minority births represented the majority of births in the U.S. This is a "tipping point," according to William H. Frey, senior demographer of the Brookings Institution, a "transformation from a mostly white baby boomer culture to the more globalized multiethnic country that we are becoming."¹⁰

Since 1965, the U.S. immigration system has been

founded on the idea that those who wished to work or be reunited with family would be allowed to enter on a visa. These immigrants are coming to the U.S. for a variety of reasons.

1. Most of the immigrants who come to the U.S. come to work (either permanently or temporarily) or to be with family.
2. Many people come to the U.S. to study. There were 723,277 international students at U.S. colleges and universities during the 2010-11 academic year, many of whom oftentimes go back to their homelands to pursue a career.¹¹
3. The U.S. also admits humanitarian migrants, and refugees fleeing persecution are resettled through an annual refugee admissions program managed by the U.S. Department of State. In FY 2011, the U.S. admitted 56,424 refugees.¹²

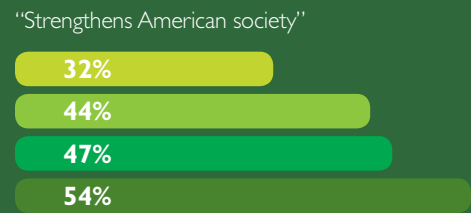
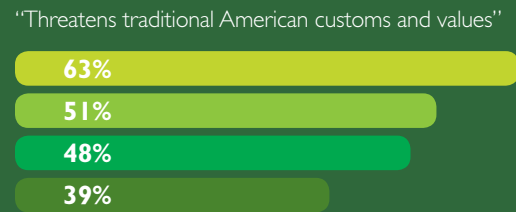
It's also estimated that 17,500 people are trafficked across U.S. borders every year.¹³



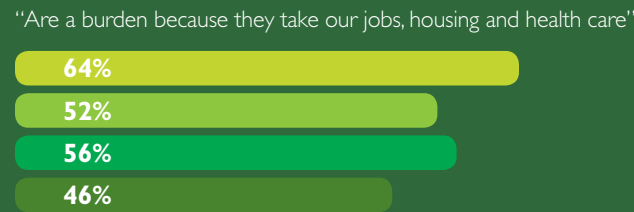
Religious Tradition and Views on Immigrants



The growing number of newcomers from other countries:



Immigrants today:



ATTITUDES OF EVANGELICALS TOWARD IMMIGRANTS

Many white Americans lament the fact that the face of America is becoming non-European. In fact, according to a study by the Pew Research Center, faith groups (including white evangelicals, white mainline Protestants and white Catholics), more than secular groups, view immigrants as a threat and a burden to traditional American customs and values, with white evangelicals at 63% the most inclined among the faith groups to think of immigrants as a menace.¹⁴

In the U.S., immigration is often debated in terms of the impact that immigrants have on the economy, and there are limited discussions on the spiritual, social, and missional impact of immigrants in the U.S. A survey of faith groups in fact found that almost all white evangelicals—88%—say that their views on immigration are primarily influenced by concerns (political, economic, personal experience, etc.) other than their Christian faith.¹⁵

The fact that Christians are seeing immigration to the U.S. from a secular worldview is troubling because Christians are missing an enormous missional opportunity. In order to view immigrants not as a threat but as part of God’s greater missional purposes, the Christian community in the U.S. must consider biblical principles and God’s greater purposes in the movement of people. “Whenever there is an opportunity for the church to reach out to people in our communities, we must consider what it will take to further the Kingdom. If this means putting down the American flag and raising the Kingdom flag, that is what we should do,” says Bill Nelson, a pastor with InterVarsity Fellowship who works with international students and has seen many come to Christ.¹⁶

Symptomatic of the need for changes in attitude and heart among Christians in the U.S., many churches have been slow to extend welcome, in part because the evangelical church in the U.S. is still largely segregated at 92.5%.¹⁷ By not having and actively building relationships within and across ethnic lines in the U.S., the U.S. church is missing out on an enormous blessing, as we never know which of the strangers we welcome might be angels in disguise (Hebrews 13:2). Our attitudes and actions toward immigrants have an enormous impact on how immigrants hear the message of the gospel, for the Great Commission—Christ’s command to make disciples

of all the nations (Matthew 28:19)—is “not just to be assumed or to be taken for granted. It has to be explicitly and constantly reminded.”¹⁸

TOWARD A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF IMMIGRANTS

It’s clear throughout Scripture that God cares for the immigrant. In the Old Testament, the word for stranger is *ger* which is often mentioned alongside the widow and orphan as people who were particularly vulnerable because they often did not have family members to take care of them, or property in order to become self-sufficient. Thus, the assistance of the community to which they migrated was critically important.

God loves immigrants and provides for them, and calls His followers to do the same.¹⁹ In Matthew 25, God commands us to extend hospitality (literally, the love of strangers)—with the suggestion that they may bless us more than we assist them.²⁰

Migration indeed is not a new phenomenon. Scripture is a story of people in exile and on the move, and many of the prominent characters in the Bible had a migration experience which was fundamental to their experience of God. Abraham, who was called to leave his homeland, Ruth, who followed her mother-in-law into Moab, Joseph who was sold into slavery in Egypt, and even Jesus was a refugee who had to flee with his parents into Egypt. What is unique about the current migration

of people is that churches that had traditionally sent missionaries in order to fulfill the Great Commission find that through diaspora communities, the missions field can be accessed without one having to cross borders.

RELIGIOUS MAKE-UP OF IMMIGRANT POPULATIONS IN THE U.S.

An understanding of the religious make-up of immigrants in the U.S. is important to seeing how immigrants have and will impact the Christian landscape in the U.S. The U.S. is the world’s number one destination for Christian migrants, who make up nearly three-quarters (74%) of all foreign-born people living in the U.S.²¹ With its huge population of immigrants, the U.S. has been a leading destination for many, though not all, religious groups.²² The U.S. is the top destination for Buddhist migrants (including many from Vietnam) and for people with no particular religious affiliation (including many from China).²³ It is the world’s second-leading destination for Hindu migrants, after India, and for Jewish migrants, after Israel.²⁴ Among the other leading countries of origin for U.S. immigrants have been the Philippines (1.8 million), India (1.7 million), China (1.4 million) and Germany (1.2 million).²⁵

MISSIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Recent immigrant groups to the U.S. are coming from



countries where missionaries have not been allowed access or where access has been extremely difficult. China, Saudi Arabia, and Iran are all countries in which missionary activity has been extremely limited, but there are thousands of immigrants coming from these countries into the U.S. When immigrants come to the U.S., they

The choice that the church faces in its response to immigrants will determine its future.

experience a freedom they often did not have in their countries of origin, allowing them to find Christ and worship freely.

However, many Christians in the U.S. have concerns in particular about the arrival of Muslim migrants, viewing their arrival as a threat to the idea of the U.S. as a “Christian nation,” even though the U.S. ranks seventh as a destination for Muslim migrants, behind many Arab nations and Europe. This kind of fear is paralyzing and undermines God’s missional purposes. “Only by living out of love and compassion for immigrants in the U.S. will followers of Christ be able to move out of their comfort zones and into the mission of God,” says a local pastor Daniel Darling.²⁶

The fact that a majority of immigrants coming to the U.S. adhere to Christianity also suggests that immigrants

will not just be a mission field but will actually be agents of mission. Immigrant congregations are growing more quickly than any other segment of American evangelicalism.²⁷ Many of the nation’s evangelical denominations are growing increasingly diverse. The Southern Baptist Convention two decades ago had only 1-in-20 non-Anglo churches but in 2010, has 1-in-5 non-Anglo churches in the denomination.²⁸ The Foursquare Church also has 20-25% of its churches in the U.S. that are distinctly ethnic, while ethnic church planting is among the fastest growing segments in the denomination.²⁹ Similarly, the Assemblies of God and the Church of the Nazarene are growing more diverse. Much of this growth can be attributed to the increase in Hispanic immigration to the U.S. One in six Foursquare churches are Hispanic and more than 20% of weekly attendees at Assemblies of God churches are Hispanic.³⁰ The Church has a great missional opportunity to minister to, through, and beyond diaspora communities. Biblically, there is just one Church—one Body, with many diverse members, interdependent upon one another, sharing in suffering (1 Corinthians 12:12-26).

MISSIONS TO THE DIASPORAS³¹

When God moves diasporas making them accessible to believers, the Church should reach them with the gospel. Many churches are experiencing tremendous

growth through intentionally choosing to welcome and integrate immigrants into their faith communities. In doing so, pastors and lay members are personally seeing God’s providential workings in the migration of people.

The welcome comes most often through authentic relationships with Christians and the development of church-based programs that serve immigrants and help them in their integration process. Willow Creek Community Church, for example, is a large church in South Barrington, outside of Chicago, Illinois, which serves 5,000 people at their Care Center that provides food, English as Second Language (ESL) classes, and legal services. They have a Spanish-speaking ministry, Casa de Luz, which has grown from a small ministry to one with several hundred members and their own Spanish-speaking pastor.

Vineyard Columbus in Columbus, Ohio, has a congregational make up of 30% minorities, with 20% African Americans and 10% who are foreign born.³² Of the foreign born, 110 nations are represented. They have 20 intentional programs serving the foreign born in their community, including English as Second Language (ESL) programs, refugee resettlement co-sponsorship, and home stay hospitality for hundreds of international students arriving in Central Ohio. This expansive list of services has provided an opportunity for the church to reach many people in the

community. “The growth of immigrants (along with the African American population) has changed our church forever,” said Pastor Bill Christensen, Associate Pastor at Vineyard Columbus. “We are expressing more fully what the Kingdom of God looks like. This is all wonderful... at times challenging...but extraordinarily rewarding!”³³ Indeed, churches that have cross cultural ministries are not only testifying to the gospel in their relationships with the foreign born but are themselves being transformed through the process.

While the experiences of many churches in the U.S. speak to God’s hand in ministering to the diaspora, this is not the case across the evangelical community. According to a survey by Harford Seminary, only 10% of evangelical churches in the U.S. have any sort of ministry or ministry partnership focused on immigrants.³⁴ This is an unfortunate reality because God’s hand is moving in diasporas communities to come to know Him in a real way, and He has called His Body to welcome and bless the nations of the world arriving to our neighborhoods.

MISSIONS THROUGH THE DIASPORAS

Diaspora communities are not just a mission field but are themselves evangelizing their own people group whether in their newfound communities or back in their homeland.³⁵ About 38.5 million (37%) U.S. immigrants come from Latin America.³⁶ While the

majority of these Latinos are Catholic, approximately 24% are Protestant or “other Christian.” This means that at 9.5 million, there are more Latino Protestants than American Jews, Muslims, Episcopalians or Presbyterians.³⁷ Orlando Quintana is a Latino youth who was brought to New Life Covenant Church in Chicago by a friend. “I think the key is family. Hispanics are really big on extended family, and people that are not family, bringing them in as family.”³⁸ This church used to have only a few dozen members but now has a membership of around 12,000 people.

There are many other immigrant groups that are reaching out to their own people groups. Among the refugee populations that have been resettled in the U.S., many are coming from previously unreached areas. The Bhutanese, for example, are a group of refugees who were confined to live in camps in Nepal for decades. Many of the young Bhutanese children have only known camp life with no hope of a better future. Despite this difficult existence, it was in these camps where many first encountered Jesus. Approximately 72% of the Bhutanese are Buddhist and the country was closed to Christian witness until 1965.³⁹ Having fled persecution and war, these refugees often experience a newfound freedom in the U.S. Many have started their own churches soon after arrival and are very evangelistic in nature. Several baptisms

have happened amongst new arrivals in Nashville, Tennessee, and at one event, 180 Bhutanese came to Christ through a Nepali Jesus video. They often gather in small house churches and in Memphis, Tennessee, they have a second-generation Bhutanese church. Nathan Kinser, World Relief Nashville’s Office Director, said, “When Bhutanese arrive, they have a vibrant faith and generic knowledge of the Bible but discipleship is a great need in this community.”⁴⁰

Other refugee groups, including many of the Burmese refugees and Iraqis, because of their previous persecution, have a depth of theology and also a fire for evangelism when they arrive to the U.S. Chin refugees, an ethnic minority in Burma, are estimated to be 90% Christian, while the Karen and Karenni are similar in their religious make-up. The Chin Baptist Churches U.S. has growing churches in Indianapolis, Indiana, Dallas, Texas, Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Baltimore, Maryland. Many of these refugees are more evangelical in nature than American evangelicals. They hold regular outreach events and are extremely well-connected throughout the U.S.

MISSIONS BEYOND THE DIASPORAS

The U.S. is becoming a significant destination target for missionaries sent from nations in the global South. This is one powerful expression of the vibrancy of faith and evangelistic zeal found among



many newly arriving believers to the U.S. Missionaries, pastors, and leaders from immigrant communities must be invited as equal co-laborers in existing missional efforts. The sharing of vision, resources, gifts, and callings will serve to impact all peoples residing in the U.S. Where needed, evangelical educational institutions can play a powerful role in providing theological training and teaching alongside diaspora communities.

Providing discipleship training and developing partnerships between immigrant churches and non-immigrant churches will also be critical for developing a diverse church community in which segregation does not persist. Among the activities necessary are⁴¹:

- Building intentional relationships between immigrant and non-immigrant leaders;
- Equipping and mentoring non-immigrant churches and immigrant churches for relationship with one another;
- Mediating church-to-church relationships and “host-church” partnerships;
- Providing or networking the resources of organizations and churches for immigrant churches’ (1) logistics (2) vision (3) leadership, and (4) second-generation issues; and
- Providing or networking the expertise of organizations and churches skilled in

contextual (1) church planting, (2) discipleship, and (3) leadership development.

CONCLUSION

Scripture, history and contemporary missiologists recognize and celebrate God’s sovereign work of moving diaspora peoples across the earth as a central part of His mission and redemptive purposes for the world. This God-ordained movement is impacting the U.S. in at least four ways: (1) Cities, towns, and rural communities are demographically diversifying in unprecedented numbers; (2) Christian immigrants to the U.S. are transforming the landscape of American Christianity through rapid growth and vibrancy; (3) Non-Christian immigrants are among the most receptive groups of people to the Gospel; and, (4) American Christians are being required to adjust both to the new diversity in our churches and denominations as well as the missional opportunity on our doorsteps. In making these important adjustments, not only will Christians in the U.S. honor their own rich heritage as a nation of immigrants but will usher in a diversity in which people from every tribe, nation, and language worship Jesus (Revelation 7:9).

Evangelical churches that are ministering to, through, and beyond diaspora communities have born

tremendous fruit in the U.S. However, much more can be done. Discipleship that works to biblically align the attitude of Christians in the U.S. toward immigrants, where only 16% of white evangelicals have heard about immigration from their pastor or other clergy, will be essential to seeing a more widespread desire in the Christian community to minister to diaspora communities.⁴² In addition, more concrete outreach and ministries to the foreign born in the U.S. will be needed. Many of these ministries must ensure that cross-cultural relationships are built and there is diversity not just within the U.S. Christian landscape but within specific churches as well. Lastly, the equipping and empowering of diaspora community leaders themselves will be crucial to ensuring that a new diverse leadership is ready and able to lead.

Diasporas have been and will continue to be an indispensable means by which God accomplishes his redemptive purposes through Jesus Christ.⁴³ The choice that the church faces in its response to immigrants will determine its future. The church can respond in fear and view the change as a threat, or recognize the incredible missional and transformational opportunity diaspora peoples provide for the church in the expansion of Christ’s kingdom.

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For ease of access to the numerous cited sources in this article, full endnotes with hyperlinks are provided online at MissioNexus.org/Immigrants.

HERE COMES THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Your local church or ministry can gain a greater understanding of your immediate community using city and county data offered free online at Census.gov for the U.S. and StatCan.gc.ca for Canada. In addition, an inexpensive local profile report may be customized at MinistryArea.com to overlay U.S. demographics with faith-based research insights.

The global movement of peoples is **too** close to home
 for us to ignore—and it’s a **big** opportunity
 for ministry **to** immigrants and internationals.
 Our church has got to **do** something
 because our neighborhood **alone** is a mission field.



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