

LEVERAGING INTERNATIONAL EVANGELICAL MIGRANT FLOW

Harvey Thiessen with Alena Popova

We are in a decade of reforming mission strategy. New realities are creating mounting obstacles to what has been done while inevitably opening up fresh opportunities. Changing demographics and people movement are factors that compel us to rethink how and where we should deploy Kingdom workers. The very nature of what those workers may look like is also open for reconsideration. A brief examination of who is going where opens up immediate possibilities for revamping some key aspects of mission strategy. Empowering evangelical believers already on the move to be frontline kingdom workers is essential in influencing key nations for the gospel. Here we examine where the greatest impact can be had.

There is much to learn from mission history. In 1884, LMS missionary David Jones¹ lamented his inability to cross the cultural and class divide with the local population in Central Africa. The people of Ughur gravitated instead to the ways and religion of the Zanzibarian Muslims whom Jones had employed as servants. These Africans spoke a different language and were considerably different culturally from those Jones served. Many elements of the cultural distance between these two African peoples were just as significant as the European gap. The Africans and the Europeans, however, lived in a different world despite living in the same geographic location. While the Ughur faced the same day to day life challenges with a similar set of resources at their disposal as the Zanzibarians, the missionary's life was completely different. Conversations around the campfire were more potent than in a classroom. There was no real possibility of identification with the locals in life or spirit with the European Jones. Jones' solution was to rid himself of the Muslim servants after realizing that conversion was happening in the wrong direction. His enlightenment view of man combined with the professionalism of the missionary endeavor was so entrenched that he could not see the power of the gospel operate in another class framework configuration altogether. Without judging another man in another time and place out of context, who knows what would have happened had he taken the opportunity to change his approach. Had he instead employed Christian Africans from another location, his work may have taken on new dimensions.

A significant swath of our mission strategy has continued to operate within a very similar framework that placed Jones in the middle of Africa with the latest gadgets and amenities in a professionalized

role. That role created communication distance rather than built the very bridge he sought for the gospel. Organizationally, we are here because he was there. Like any other organism the missionary organization clings to the sustenance that brought it to life. While we remain wrapped up in the organization, it is difficult to imagine life being anything other than what it is. All systems and processes are built to perpetuate and preserve its own lifeform and enhance it – not challenge it. It may be time to crawl into our chrysalis and emerge something other.

It is becoming increasingly clear though that we are well into the safety margin built into the 'best before date' for what some have deemed a hugely successful traditional mission. We are hoping there is still 30 KMs worth of petrol in the tank when the fuel light is on. Political realities, the disappearance of the right to stay and the general hardening of borders to the professional missionary class means that relying on this way of achieving the great commission is taking up increasing resources while achieving fewer breakthroughs. While previous approaches have sparked an incredible era of gospel dissemination, these ways are having diminishing returns which may anyways be ancillary results to the actual strategies employed. It may just be that the bet strategy was and is simple obedience. We would, however, be dishonoring the heroes and strategists of the past if we were simply to emulate them and repeat without learning and adapting. They did the best with what they were given and we must do the best with a different set of conceptual, political and even technological tools. The remaining unreached regions are going to need additional prayerful intervention in ways we have not fully utilized just yet.

A fundamental aspect of the missionary task is moving people from one place to another. It is abundantly clear that general people movement across borders will continue even as the global environment affecting population currents is changing. As the massive economic impact of the COVID19 pandemic gathers steam, the push and pull factors at play will be exacerbated. To some extent the number of migrants in 2020/21 has receded because of border shutdowns, loss of migrant jobs, cross border travel restrictions and shuttering of economies. To those of us with an eye on population movements, this exact moment in time of 2020 and early 2021 though feels analogous to the receding tide just prior to a tsunami making landfall. Massive economic shifts and damage across continents will create conditions for even greater mobility. Conflict and economic parrying between nations and disruptions within will cause movement.

1. Jonathan J. Bonk, *The Theory and Practice of Missionary Identification, 1860-1920* (Lampeter, Dyfed: Edwin Millen Press, 1989), page 54.

Criminals and terrorists will use the opportunity provided by the pandemic to sow unrest and fear and profit from it in their own ways. Inequity in vaccine distribution and access to care will exacerbate the plight of the have nots and contribute to growing authoritarianism in response to already unstable countries.

How do we adapt our mission strategies in the midst of these factors? Parts of the church have shown us how effective migrant believers can be in the mission effort. Our experience as a mission organization with workers in least reached zones has shown us that the hardening of borders for traditional mission work is accelerating. How can we refashion or reframe our workforce so it can continue to push forward into these zones? OM's internal group "Scatter Global"² which is focused on mobilizing Jesus followers to least reached areas while fully engaged in their vocational and life pursuits, commissioned a study to look at existing flow of people to see what we could learn. Of the 240 million migrants recorded in 2019, how many of these might be evangelical believers? If we were to zero in our attention on activating and fully mobilizing evangelical migrants to live their lives fully as Great Commission Jesus Followers what prioritized zones could be affected? Of the existing people flow, how many evangelicals are going to least reached geographic zones? If sending professional missionaries to these regions is getting more difficult and less strategic, are there natural people flows of Jesus followers to these regions that could be activated and equipped to do the things we would have asked them to do had we sent them?

We took the 2019 UN migration data³ and superimposed Joshua Project information⁴ to estimate the number of evangelicals that are likely part of the migrant stock. We assumed that the general population rates also could apply to migration populations. This could be wrong because there could be sub-populations like Jews returning to Israel. It could also be wrong because persecuted Christians might be more likely to migrate because they can't find jobs locally. So, the data should be viewed as more illustrative than actual. While clearly not precise, we are comfortable enough with the results to make some strategic conclusions. Here is what we learned. There are about 3 million evangelicals⁵ working in least reached countries (as defined by Joshua Project). This dwarfs the number of fulltime missionaries working in those countries. While they likely don't have the theological training of fulltime mission

2. Scatter Global. Accessed December 23, 2020. <http://www.scatterglobal.com/>.

3. "United Nations Population Division | Department of Economic and Social Affairs." United Nations. United Nations. Accessed December 23, 2020. <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/index.asp>.

4. Project, Joshua. Joshua Project. Accessed December 23, 2020. <https://joshuaproject.net/>.

5. Limiting believers to this definition is not meant to exclude those from other Christian faith traditions who may not be formally associated with the evangelical church.

workers, they certainly have a similar spiritual reality as the Christians of Acts that were scattered to various parts of the Roman empire as well as greater face time with the indigenous populations. Let us also remember the Zanzibarians who were able to convert fellow Africans to Islam – they were servants.

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Most people live within narrow migration corridors – usually related to language, culture and natural links between countries. On a one-off basis, there is truth in "everywhere to everywhere" but for populations it is clear that "somewhere to a few nearby places" is a better description of people flow. This is important because we cannot imagine that a strategy based solely on migrant believers is sufficient. There are vast areas where there are no such populations. Many of these countries though send people into Christianized zones. Here the efforts must be focused on activating locals to engage the diaspora and engaging in those locations. This is where the other side of the coin must be deployed – there are large numbers from unreached zones living in the heart of Christianized geography. In Canada, from where I write, they are the colleagues, fellow students and neighbors of our parishioners. Discipling ourselves to be front line kingdom workers is urgent to reach into the heart of far flung geographies. Every Somali in Canada is a whatsapp call away from an unreached village in Somalia.

Meanwhile at home, churches' newfound abilities with virtual connection, an outgrowth of our pandemic response, can be deployed. Geography need no longer define our engagement. Discipleship apps, digital Bibles, even the awkwardness of Google Translate can be used to connect ordinary Christians with those who may never have the chance to meet a believer in their lives otherwise. Now is the time for innovation and opportunity if we can only disciple well. The world is about to get a whole lot smaller for people in the least reached zones. Elon Musk's efforts to bring internet connectivity to every space on

earth will have the most profound effect on the global social order that we have seen. It is time for the whole church to gear up to enter these heretofore prohibited zones virtually.



Figure 1- least reached with minimal number of evangelical migrants

Ninety percent (90%) of evangelical migrants living in least reached places are concentrated in just 15 countries. This gives a significant foothold in some very strategic places, but also highlights how some countries really are bereft of Gospel influence.



Figure 2 - 90% of Evangelical Migrants live in 15 countries

Less than 10 countries provide sizeable movements of evangelicals to prioritized zones. This is really helpful in focusing our attention on these particular countries. We can collaborate with local churches to turn migrant population statistics into 'called Kingdom workers'. There are growing numbers already doing this because, unsurprisingly, people encountering Jesus generally get the idea that we are expected to share our faith - obedience and skills are another matter.



Figure 3- Top 10 sources of Evangelical Migrants

Many of the evangelical migrant populations

come from places which are typically thought of as "receiving" fields. Both the local and global churches need to acknowledge that these populations, while considered small, are large enough to go/send. Foreign missionaries have a new and exciting challenge in places where the gospel has taken root. They should be careful not to instill a view of the local church as the end product of missions. Rather, together with local Christian leaders, examine where the Holy Spirit is taking members of their congregations and view them as de facto Kingdom Workers. With such a view, a new commissioning can take hold and even bring a fresh enthusiasm, sense of calling and purpose to the church. This certainly applies to the former "receiving" fields of: Philippines, China, Egypt, Brazil, Romania, Indonesia, Myanmar, and India- all of which are now sending powerhouses. The biggest conceptual barrier exists in the minds of believers and their leaders themselves. Believers from these churches must understand that they are not the finish line of missions, but a runner on the team that has to both receive and pass on the baton. With such a view and calling, much can be done to disciple, prepare and care for a new flood of workers into these priority zones.

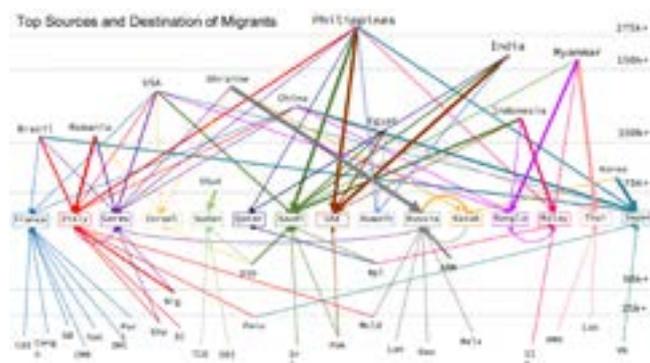


Figure 4 - Top Sources and Destinations

What is needed to strategically activate these believers to engage fully in the Great Commission? Aside from the Filipino and Indian churches, there is little evidence of activation within the other migrant populations. While clearly evangelicals instinctively find each other, meet and worship, they do not necessarily see themselves as commissioned to be Kingdom Workers. It is crucial that the home church see the potential and the responsibility. When the church realizes that their members are heading into an overseas job assignment that will put them face to face with an unreached people, and these parishioners have the calling of God on their lives, new creativity, training and preparation and support will be unleashed. Discipling them, imbuing them with vision and formally commissioning them as Kingdom Workers, as sent ones, will revolutionize the view of the migrant worker of themselves and their role along with those that send them. Many churches have felt themselves too insignificant because of lack

of resources in responding to the Great Commission. However it is these very lack of resources that is pushing church members into least reached zones and giving opportunity to participate in the missional propagation of the gospel. We have wrongly coupled the effectiveness of strategy with access to resources in mission history. Those who have can. Those who have not cannot. The downstream effect of this is that the thinking and strategies of resource laden individuals, groups and peoples are considered more forward thinking, in line with what God wants to do and the most effective. The opposite may well be true. We need to learn from those who have gone before. The Filipino church has been at the forefront of this effort in the last decades and has learned much in motivating and equipping migrant workers. Their accumulated wisdom and knowledge needs to be explored and built on in a spirit of collaboration (if we are invited). It is not an easy venture by any means and not an automatic avenue of success. These workers face unique challenges and risks that need the support of both the home church and potentially mission agencies as well. We need to curate their learning and pass it on to other key nations. Mission agencies must encompass within their mobilization strategy the lay Christians among this migrant stream (both upstream and downstream). Training, evangelism resources, advice, venues to cooperate and so much more can be rallied to mobilize, activate and support these citizens of the Kingdom. This is not a call to deconstruct the mission agency - not at all. It is time to redefine what strategic realignment is needed to best empower a new mission workforce. We need the wisdom, organizational might and commitment of the agency to carve out new paths and jump on new opportunities.

Europe hosts the largest diversity of all migrant sources



Figure 5 - Spread of EM in least reached zones

Churches and denominations need to retell the story of the role of the average Christian and their worth and the worth of their work as Kingdom people. The secular/sacred divide has plagued the evangelical view of work and worship. This has hamstrung the reach of the gospel. Pastors intuitively know that their role is to make disciples and yet, the average Christian has no skills to make their work place a worship place. It is time to claim that place and skill for Jesus. This is, of course, a much deeper fundamental shift that needs

to happen so that when our members find themselves in another part of the world, they know that God has placed them there for such a time as this. Something greater is at play than a valid personal responsibility to care for family.

Certainly the foreigner is always the first to be blamed (especially in the spreading of disease) and social pressures are likely to mold the future of millions of transnationals. Things will not be as they were and even the above data is likely to shift. The unpredictable consequences of a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape means we will need to keep paying attention.

This is not a general call to all (other than the call to disciple well). Our research has indicated very specific existing patterns of evangelical migration to high priority zones. This means two things. Our attention must be focused on building up the mission vision in source communities to leverage this opportunity. It also means that for other zones, other strategies must be pursued. Further analysis is sure to highlight other emerging possibilities. Yet, while size should draw our attention and the urgency of the gospel compels us to look for the biggest and best solutions, *citius altius fortius* is not the ultimate Christian principle. The Holy Spirit in disciples gathered in community anywhere of any size means they have the power of the Creator within them and before them. He will bring things to completion.



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