

When the Ends of the Earth Come to Town

Reverse Mission - A London City Mission Perspective

1. Christianity is a Migration Religion

The Covenant is a Covenant of Migration

- Abraham called to migrate from Ur (Gen 12, 15)
- God's "right answer" at Babel was not a defensively static city, but a world-filling migration
- In Joseph's life an unwilling migrant secures food not only for Israel but for Egypt, too!
- At Sinai, Israel is denoted a "Kingdom of Priests" (Exodus 19), implying a ministry that will migrate to the whole world.
- Famine leads Naomi to migrate to Moab, and love causes Ruth to migrate to Bethlehem – and into the genealogy of Jesus.
- The enforced migration of Daniel demonstrates the reality of God's presence and power "away from home", as well as in Jerusalem.
- In the New Testament, the Great Commission, assumes a new geometry of mission, with "going into all the world" replacing the possibility of Gentiles "coming" to a Jerusalem temple.
- At Antioch a key step is taken, where refugee migrants proclaim Christ indiscriminately in a cosmopolitan trading city, a city of migrants; where the Christian Church gets its distinctive identity because there is no available name for the converts of this migrating religion; and where systematic mission begins.
- By the time 1 Peter is written, the Church can be described as "The Church of God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered..." "resident aliens and exiles". (1 Peter 1:1 and 2:11). The entire church is a migrant community.

As Paul asserted to the Athenians (Acts 17:26), so we believe, that human migrations ("the times set for them and the exact places where they should live") are no accident, no mere product of socio-economic or political forces, but are determined by an all-sovereign God, who works all things together in his great salvation-purpose.

2. London is a Migration City

Founded in 1835, LCM has for the whole of its existence been interacting with immigration, ministering to and with immigrants:

- The early growth of London, by migration from rural areas of England;
- Welsh and Irish migration, with LCM recruiting and Welsh and Gaelic-speakers as Missionaries;
- Europeans, often refugees from 19th century wars. Many converts returning to countries then closed to normal missionary work - (eg, Spain or South America);
- From as early as 1860, LCM had a missionary to Asian and African seamen who came to London's docks. Missionaries learned Asian and African languages, and provided mercy ministries;

- The great eastern European Jewish migration into London (c 1880-1910) was ministered to by a whole group of men who were themselves converted Jews. LCM translated and published the whole Bible in Yiddish;

In the late 20th century immigration has been larger in scale, but has often built on those earlier migrations (eg Bangladeshi migrants settled in Docklands because early Bengali seamen had settled there.)

LCM's present team of some 150 salaried outreach workers reflects the balance of London's whole population, with about 30% being from non-British backgrounds.

LCM's ministries engage with the migrant population, and with the migrant churches of London:

- Our new "Departure" Arts and Community Centre in Limehouse sees women in burkhas joining in sewing classes, as well as jam-sessions involving a Bangladeshi rapper, a Nigerian drummer and a Chilean guitarist.
- In Southall, LCM worker Harish Patel (a converted Hindu, born in Nairobi) works with a church-plant that has Sikh, Hindu and Muslim converts in its membership;
- LCM worker Andrew Hawkins is a chaplain to the Metropolitan Police in NE London, and has facilitated the link between the Police and Street Pastors.
- in Mottingham, Jason Marrinner, of Black British descent, works with the local church in Mottingham to run the Gideon Project, using football in the community to reach young men of various ethnic backgrounds;
- LCM has 3 Polish workers in its team, who have many opportunities to assist in schools which are facing a mass influx of Polish children – and this month we have our first Russian team member joining us.

3. LCM and African/Afro-Caribbean Christians

LCM has team members from 9 African countries, ranging from Egypt to South Africa, Liberia to Kenya.

Being an organisation that aims to reach *non*-Christians, LCM is eagerly reaching out to the muslim population, and to non-Christians from Europe and around the world. But in doing that it has many points-of-contact with the African and Afro-Caribbean churches: In areas like Becontree/Dagenham, LCM workers have developed close links in prayer and support with local churches, many of them Black-led, or with significant African or A/C constituencies.

The Mission also has many volunteers and supporters from immigrant communities, eg in London Hospital Ministries, which facilitates volunteers to serve as Hospital Visitors.

*Brief Interview with Daada Luogon
LCM Missionary in the Kings Cross area.*

Daada became a Christian in his native Liberia, through the ministries developed by WEC missionaries.

During the civil wars in Liberia, several of his family (including his father) were murdered. Daada himself survived a massacre and fled the country, and was helped by WEC missionaries to come to the UK. He worked for a while with the Faith Mission before coming to LCM.

His experiences give him deep sympathy and understanding as he ministers to immigrants and others in the impoverished areas of Kings Cross.

He retains close links with the church in Liberia, and is encouraging and supporting his friends there in a church-planting programme which has seen 6 new churches started in the past year

Reflections

1. On the major presence of African and Afro-Caribbean Christianity in London

1.1 A significant influx of lively Christianity into a city where even evangelical Christianity has been on the wane for the past half-century

1.2 A significant influx of lively Christians into some of the most spiritually-deprived areas (UPAs) of our city – including inner city areas such as Kings Cross, and council estates across the city.

1.3 This migration has provided a strengthening of struggling (British) churches – eg. An Anglican congregation in SW London, which has some 60% Black and Asian attenders among its morning congregation.

1.4 The planting of new churches by this group of Christians has given an impetus to the growth of church-planting by other groups, and has also contributed fresh thinking on outreach – eg Street Pastors.

1.5 But this particular migration is not a totally new phenomenon, and like all activities on earth, is a mixed blessing that has to be reflected on, and constantly renewed in the light of Scripture and the power of the Holy Spirit.

1.6 Similar movements can be useful as comparisons:
- eg. Hispanic impact in New England, where old, traditional churches have been

revitalised.

eg. The migration of Highland Scots (with a strongly evangelical Christianity) to Canada in 1920s and 30s.

In a spirit of mature brotherly love and humility, we (immigrants and native English) can and must interact on our strengths and weaknesses – and especially on the challenges that face us all.

2. *Questions that should be considered by the Immigrant Christians and Churches*

2.1 Immigration has social aspects that can affect churches:

- the attraction of the familiar, the security of being in a majority, may be major factors in numerical growth of immigrant churches. People may come regularly to such churches without necessarily having any genuinely spiritual motivation.

- in exile communities, there is a tendency to idealise and absolutise “home” and its culture, making churches isolated from the society in which they are placed.

- the opposition and (racial) discrimination that many immigrants face can reinforce this, and produce defensive and self-justifying mindset.

- 2nd and 3rd generation immigrants may be repelled by the very things that attract the 1st generation to their churches (eg they may feel happier speaking English instead of the “home” language of their parents, and may prefer British food and attire to traditional). Such children may transfer to British churches – with the result that immigrant churches which flourish in the 1st generation may decline rapidly a generation later. Or the children may reject Christianity altogether, seeing it as a mere cultural memory of their parent’s homeland.

NB. I do not suggest that the above things will happen, or must happen. I simply observe that they have happened, to some degree, in many previous migrant communities – and that it would be wise to consider what can be done to minimise any harm that they might cause to the migrant churches of today.

2.2 Migrant churches need to step out of their own culture, too

1 Corinthians 9:19-23 applies to us all! Immigrant churches need to ask themselves if they are prepared to step out of their culture, to please not (just) native British Christians, but (more importantly) native British (and other) **non**-Christians? In other words, are they determined to be Biblically-migrant churches, - invasive, missional churches?

This may especially raise the **locality** question – Many black-led churches seem to be gathered churches, only loosely and temporarily related to the district where they worship, and drawing their congregations from far and wide. They can be sources of irritation to local inhabitants (a car-parking problem!), and often move on to a completely different area, when a more suitable building becomes available. But if a migrant

church is to reach the whole population, it may be essential for it to put down strong and lasting roots in a particular neighbourhood, identifying with it and building close links with all sections of it.

This raises another migrant question, namely the hostility that can exist between different migrant communities, because of historical, ethnic, or social factors (eg New York Irish and Jews). A mission-minded African church may have a key role in reaching out to South Asian muslims - but there are barriers of prejudice and cultural differences that need to be overcome.

2.3 Theological depth and relevance

Many immigrant churches have a significant proportion of poorly-paid members and are financially struggling. This, together with cultural attitudes to theological study, and a tendency to recruit their preachers and leaders from the church “back home”, may mean that they have little opportunity to develop a theology, and theological training, that addresses the particular challenges they face.

2.4 Fragmentation

Multiplication and growth is one thing, fragmentation and duplication is another. When 3 churches from the same African country hire the same hall at different times on a Sunday, what is going on? Are there better ways of expressing the unity we have in Christ, and of developing the great mission that Christ has given to all his people?

Now who are we English Christians to talk on these things? We are in no way perfect – and can only expect our African brothers and sisters to take notice if we speak humbly, and if we are evidently recognising and dealing with our own failings and the questions they are asking of us.

3. Challenges to English Christians and Churches

3.1 African and Afro-Caribbean migration provides a healthy bench-mark for our own church life. We are no longer the only fish in the pond, and can no longer hide from the challenges and weaknesses of our situation by saying “ours is the only way of being Christians in Britain”!

3.2 Have we forgotten that we, too, are supposed to be a migrant church?

Richard Lovelace (in his “Dynamics of Spiritual Life”) describes how lively churches tend to sink into spiritual inertia and become unhealthily “enculturated” within the culture of their (secular) community. Lovelace says that “disenculturation” is one key aspect of revival. If English churches are true to the Bible, then we, too, are “resident aliens”, living here only temporarily as we look for a “city to come”.

3.3 Have we realised that we, too, have a culture that may not be healthily Biblical in all aspects?

In our worship – we assume that our particular worship style is the best, or even the only acceptable one.

In our English preaching style, we may shun emotion, avoid bluntness of application, and sound like university lecturers – and never question this, despite the NT evidence of passion, anger and tears in the ministry of Jesus, or Paul (see 2 Corinthians, for example)

In our selection of leaders we may criticise the “nepotism” of some Asian and African cultures – while never querying why so many of our leaders went to the same colleges or schools. Why is it taking so long for black members in “mixed” churches and organisations to be recognised and appointed to positions of leadership? Is it because they are not gifted by God? Or is it because our assumptions and systems are “slanted” by our English system of class and culture?

In the organisational structures of our churches and ministries, we seem to be moving from what I might call the old “Colonial” 3-tier structure (Local Church/ Home Mission Society/Foreign Mission Society) to what is the “Franchising” or “Empire-building” model (where the local church grows and develops its own evangelistic method and material, starts its own college and training courses, replicates itself by its own church-planting, and funds operations in distant countries which will pursue an identical strategy). Now there may be very valid and useful elements in either or both of these structures. But it should be evident to us that they are both strongly influenced (not to say, developed from) secular models – of colonial government in the first case, and of globalised marketing techniques in the other.

In all the above areas, our African and Afro-Caribbean fellow-Christians are a challenge to us, and their presence and culture invites us to re-look at ourselves, and to take part in the on-going reformation of the church.

4. A Way Forward - A syllabus for reflexion, discussion and action

I believe that it is high time for us, especially here in London, to seize the opportunity presented by the “reverse mission” of our day. To do that, we will have to overcome a habit of non-communication that has been allowed to develop between our various churches and groupings. I would suggest that we need:

- 4.1 A forum for mutual evaluation, challenge, envisioning and prayer
- cf Romans 15:14
- 4.2 A clear acknowledgment that our Biblical goal must be to create Galatians/Ephesians/Revelation 7 churches, that embrace all ethnic and social groups in a lively unity. The Christian church can never be content to be a “homogeneous unit”
- 4.3 An openness to re-assess the needs and methods of theological training in this age
- 4.4 A better framework for “migrant mission” than the Colonialist or the Franchising models

4.5 An harmonious approach to the awesome task of seizing the mission opportunities that we face in London today – opportunities with regard to the Muslim and Hindu populations, and to the new communities from Catholic and Orthodox eastern Europe, and to the neglected white working-class.

To do this we need humility, wisdom and passion, for it is not an easy or a painless task. But how can the covenanted church of Jesus Christ do anything less?

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