

Equipping the Transient for Ministry in a Global City

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Published as: Crane, M. D. (2014). Equipping the Transient for Ministry in a Global City. *The New Urban World Journal*, 3(1), 7–15.

Aaron rose up early one morning with a purpose: today he was going to seek asylum with the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR). He lined up with two hundred strangers from countries all over the world. The people in the room vividly portray the heavy human cost of war, ethnic hatred, and totalitarian states. Aaron is from a Middle Eastern country where totalitarian rule has made life extremely difficult for its citizens. He was hesitant to claim asylum, but he does not have other options to legally reside in another country. The UNHCR representative gave him an appointment to seek refugee status. That interview was scheduled for two years and one month later. In the meantime, he works long hours at meagre wages in a country that simultaneously tolerates and exploits these asylum seekers.

There are a number of large cities here in Southeast Asia that have become transit points for asylum seekers, refugees, and migrant workers. Millions of these transient peoples are eking out a living in big, economically prosperous cities like Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, and Bangkok. Many of them leave their home countries either to find some kind of work or to escape oppressive circumstances. It is becoming normal in these cities to be foreign.¹

Although their presence is normal, migrant workers and refugees live on the edge. Their legal status in the host country is tenuous at best. Employers exploit them at every turn. Their living conditions are often slum-like. In the midst of such difficulties, many come to embrace the hope they can experience in Jesus Christ.

A ray of hope for those who are Christians living in such vulnerability is their church community. But there is a problem. There aren't enough people who are equipped to start churches or lead them. Paul Pierson recognizes this to be a global problem, and yet he notes that "they constitute the cutting edge of the church in many areas and are responsible for much of the growth."² The traditional answer to this has been to send potential pastors off to a formal academic seminary for three to four years. This is hardly an option for most migrant workers and refugees. In this article we will explore some of the obstacles and opportunities in equipping the transient for fruitful ministry while they are living in a global city.

Obstacles

My friend Aaron became a Christian a couple of years ago. He came to faith in Christ here in this Southeast Asian global city and now has a passion for his people to know Christ. He is young, friendly and hard-working, and shows a lot of promise as a leader. Through him and the labor of others, a small church fellowship of refugees has begun. Even though he is in a

¹ "Being Foreign: The Others," *The Economist*, December 17, 2009, accessed November 18, 2013, <http://www.economist.com/node/15108690>.

² Paul E. Pierson, "The New Context of Christian Mission: Challenges and Opportunities for the Asian Church," in *Asian Church and God's Mission*, ed. Wonsuk Ma and Julie C. Ma (Manila: OMF Publishers, 2003), 27.

transient situation, he wants to be equipped to minister to his people more effectively. But there are many obstacles in effectively equipping Aaron and others like him.

Transience

Most often, the traditional seminary model will not work as a solution to pastor development. Life in the city requires money, and these transient urban dwellers have little of it. They must work long hours at very low wages in order to make ends meet. Many have to change jobs or move every few months. One refugee friend has had to change jobs four times during the last year and a half.

An added difficulty that often comes with transience is the susceptibility to falling into destructive lifestyle patterns. Many of those who move away from their closely-knit social structures begin to make lifestyle choices they would never have made in their home countries. Often these choices lead to long-term consequences like addictions, abusive behaviors, and disease.

It is already a challenge to train leaders when they are susceptible to moving at any time. If they are refugees, they could be sent to their next country at a moment's notice. And part of the reality of working with the transient is dealing with the kinds of sin they are dealing with. The challenge is not only helping potential leaders address these problems in their own lives, but also learning how to shepherd churches with many people who are dealing with these struggles. We need programs designed for equipping those lacking a solid educational background where they develop the necessary skills and knowledge without adding the weight of heavy academic rigour.

Weak Educational Background

Migrant workers and refugees are coming from developing nations where they often lack access to quality education or opportunities for self-education (i.e. libraries, technology, or internet). One of my students struggling in a master's level seminary course said that he felt robbed by his home country's education, even at the university level. Another student interested in taking seminary courses had never used a computer in his life. Both of these men have a heart to serve God and show tremendous leadership potential. But the current methods of equipping pastors exclude them by starting at a level that is too demanding and that requires computer sufficiency. An educational system that requires only rote memorization on exams also does little to prepare Christian leaders to interpret and explain the Scriptures for their context.

Models of theological education are needed that are easily understood and that are transferable in churches of migrant workers and refugees. Paul demonstrated an ability to equip leaders who could equip more leaders (2 Tim. 2:2). Theological education that is not transferable or reproducible is likely to do more to puff up the individual with pride than to prepare pastors for the flock.

Mind-set of Churches

Despite the educational disadvantages of the transient poor, there is pressure from their traditional churches to obtain master's degrees and sometimes even doctorates. Those from people groups with an established Christian population bring the demands and expectations

of traditional/institutionalized churches. One student from Myanmar told me that in their culture pastoral ordination would only happen after obtaining a Master of Divinity degree. This leaves them with the impression that their ability to shepherd, lead, or teach is not that important; it matters only that they have the academic prerequisite. This leads many to go to institutions that will give away master's degrees like candy. I met one man who held a high position in his denomination who went to such a seminary in another country but had never written one essay formulating his own thoughts on a topic. He was taught only to copy and paste from books. The fallout from these practices is not merely the issue of plagiarism or lack of academic integrity. This man was not equipped as a Christian leader. Even when he faces simple problems in his ministry he does not have the skills or thought processes he needs to address them.

Traditional churches also bring expectations of having full time pastors who can see to every need in a congregation (of which there are many in this kind of context). Here in this city, migrant workers earn meagre wages and must send much of it back to support families at home, and refugees are not allowed to work. This means that churches of the transient poor cannot afford to pay the salary of a full time pastor. Yet often they will not accept bi-vocational pastors. Indian scholar J. N. Manokaran has observed the need for bi-vocational pastors in our growing cities: "There is a need for a paradigm shift from 'full time' or 'career missionary' or 'professional clergy' to 'priesthood of all believers' in India today."³ His observation certainly holds true for churches composed of migrant workers and refugees.

Opportunities

Stan came from a nearby impoverished nation about fifteen years ago to earn a living. As a minority from his nation, he had few economic opportunities available to him. Stan took a job as a bartender and served in a small church of other migrant workers like himself. As Stan learned more English he was able to work at higher paying, more official jobs, such as working as a butler for a foreign diplomat. During his fifteen years the situation in his home country went from bad to worse, and he saw the number of migrant workers arriving from his home country grow to hundreds of thousands. Even though Stan had a nice stable job, he had a heart to minister to this influx of migrant workers. So he quit his job in order to be equipped to start churches among his people in his host city.

Opportunities abound for the developing and equipping of pastors and leaders among the transient poor. Just as the Apostle Paul's approach to developing leaders was multi-dimensional,⁴ we need a multi-dimensional approach to the development of Christian leaders among transient urban dwellers. Below are three ways in which we can improve the development of leaders to minister to the transient poor.

Transient Types of Training and Educating

It has been established that the current academic institutions are not adequate for equipping leaders for diaspora churches. The seminary model presumes the student has accomplished the prerequisite education needed and is fully competent in the language of the host country.

³ J. N. Manokaran, *Christ & Cities: Transformation of Urban Centres* (Chennai: Missional Educational Books, 2005), 31–32.

⁴ Chuck Lawless, "Paul and Leadership Development," in *Paul's Missionary Methods: In His Time and Ours*, ed. Robert L. Plummer and John Mark Terry (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 219.

Nimble and innovative models need to be developed that will provide training in the languages of the transient and at more basic levels of education.

In my city, there are a large number of refugees from the same nation as Stan. Many of these refugees have a desire to serve in Christian ministry but do not have the opportunity to be equipped to serve. An American woman recognized this need and established a training school at a certificate level. Refugees spend four hours each week learning about the Bible and how to minister through evangelism, discipleship, and even basic counselling skills. But they also work in pairs to lead new small groups all over the city. Migrant workers have very little control over their schedule, making it difficult to consistently worship as a big church every Sunday. By having small group gatherings all over the city, they have opportunities for worship, Bible study, and community that they would not have had. And those in the certificate course have hands-on training on how to lead these groups well. This training school has been an integral part of the growth and flourishing of disciples while they are refugees.

An essential skill for those in ministry is interpreting and explaining God's Word in the church. In our postmodern milieu, hermeneutics has grown into a highly intricate discipline. To follow the nuances of different hermeneutical methods, one must be highly attuned to abstract thinking and epistemological self-awareness. This is a valuable discipline in certain contexts, but we must prioritize methods that those with less formal education can learn in order to effectively preach the Word to their congregations. Larry Caldwell has done excellent work in distinguishing different levels of hermeneutics depending on the context.⁵

Transformational for all of Life

In my seminary days I was required to take a class on church administration. The textbook for the class had a chapter on how to run a church kitchen. Needless to say, a lot of the material covered in seminaries presumes a middle class ministry context. Ministers and leaders among the transient urban poor need to be equipped to handle the struggles and issues of their people.⁶ People living in the margins of society face crises perpetually and have very little safety net to help break the fall. We need to equip pastors and other leaders who can provide healthy and biblical responses to these many complex issues. While some of this can be taught in classes, there is a need for hands-on learning with wise mentors alongside them. This means we need seminary lecturers and pastors who routinely minister in these often neglected contexts.

Seminaries have remained aloof for too long. Ronald Peters has observed that seminaries and middle-class churches have created a closed system in which they are no longer engaged with the realities of our growing cities.⁷ In order to provide a different kind of education, we need educators that will get their hands dirty. Academic educators often have their hands full teaching, grading, and writing. Our new citified world needs educators who can balance academics with experiential types of education and mentorship. If we want ministers who can

⁵ Larry W. Caldwell, "Interpreting the Bible with the Poor," in *The Church and Poverty in Asia*, ed. Lee Wanak (Manila: OMF Literature, 2008), 171–180.

⁶ Larry W. Caldwell and Enoch Wan, "Riots in the City: Replacing Nineteenth-century Urban Training Models with Relevant 'Urbanized' Training Models for the Twenty-first Century," in *Reaching the City: Reflections on Urban Mission for the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Gary Fujino, Timothy R. Sisk, and Tereso C. Casino, Evangelical Missiological Society Series No. 20 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2012), 98.

⁷ Ronald Peters, *Urban Ministry: An Introduction* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 6.

thrive in the urban context and lead churches in global cities, we need those who teach them to know the urban context.⁸ Since seminary professors have many demands on their time, this will entail making urban exegesis a priority.

Transcultural Involvement for Greater Impact

Arnold is a citizen of the country to which Aaron and Stan both came in search employment and opportunity. Arnold recognized the hundreds of thousands of people coming from surrounding nations as migrant workers or refugees. The working and living conditions for many of these people broke Arnold's heart. He also noted that these migrant workers and refugees come from nations where there has been little or no access to the good news of Jesus. Arnold was struck by the reality that he had a great opportunity to minister to these vulnerable people right in his own city. He started up a ministry that could minister to these masses from neighboring nations. Ten years later, his ministry is actively working with migrant workers and refugees from eight different nations. Arnold's ministry kept him so busy that he has been unable to get the education he feels he should have to thrive in his ministry.

Ministering to the urban transient poor will require collaborative efforts from many different cultures. A key to equipping the transient for ministry is equipping others in the host country to equip the transient for ministry. Arnold lacked this kind of training. He needed an integrated curriculum that could combine the important skills in biblical interpretation and theology with the ability to understand urban poverty, migration dynamics, and cross-cultural leadership development. Programs are needed that proactively train ministers to be effective across cultures and socio-economic strata.

Harvie Conn and Manuel Ortiz describe the need for a multicultural leadership team for city impact.⁹ Some of the migrant workers and refugees come from a Christian heritage which increases the likelihood of developing indigenous leaders from within. Many others come from nations where there is little or no access to the gospel. In these cases, cross-cultural missionaries, like Arnold, are needed to initiate the work among each ethnic group. Now Arnold is actively equipping other Christian leaders from this host country to learn how to minister to those arriving from many different surrounding countries.

Conclusion

Millions of people have come to global cities with the hope of a better life. Too few encounter Christian hope because of a lack of leaders who are equipped to minister to them. These mobile masses have the potential to spread the hope found in Christ all over the world. In fact, the poor and marginalized might just be "the greatest resource for God's mission in

⁸ Glenn Smith, "Towards the Transformation of Our Cities/Regions," in *Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 37* (presented at the 2004 Forum for World Evangelization, Pattaya: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 2004), 22, accessed October 30, 2009, <http://www.lausanne.org/all-documents/lop-37-towards-the-transformation-of-our-citiesregions.html>.

⁹ Harvie M. Conn and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, & the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 384.

the multi-cultural context of Asia.”¹⁰ We can conclude then, that equipping these transient poor should be among our highest priorities.

We must raise our awareness of the obstacles preventing potential pastors and Christian leaders from being equipped to serve the Body of Christ. Given the transience of migrant workers and refugees, we must be fleet and nimble in our efforts to equip them for their ministry. We must adapt our methods of teaching so that they may be able to grasp and pass on these vital, life-giving truths of the gospel. And it is imperative that we assist the church to shift its priorities away from formal titles and diplomas and return to the New Testament pattern of recognizing Christ-like character as the raw material from which a pastor is moulded.

As we recognize the tremendous potential of these diaspora peoples, we will need to develop models of theological education and leadership development designed with the transient in mind. This means we need structures that are adaptable and require minimal resources. The contents of our training should be transformational in scope. We are equipping leaders for a messy world, therefore they need to be equipped theologically and practically to engage real world issues so that we see a multiplication of Jesus disciples. And, finally, we need to equip those who are not among the transient poor to understand, assist, and equip leaders among the transient poor. The task of equipping the transient for flourishing ministries in our cities is one for the whole church. Only in our collective and unified effort can we maximize the full complement of the gifts given to the Body of Christ. It could be that these churches of the transient show us what it truly means to be strangers and aliens in the city of man (1 Pet. 2:11), and yet thrive as a fellowship of citizens in the city of God (Eph. 2:19).

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¹⁰ Jacob Thomas, “Equipping and Resourcing of Asian Mission Movements,” in *Understanding Asian Mission Movements: Proceedings of the Asian Mission Consultations 2008-2010*, ed. Kang San Tan, Jonathan Ingleby, and Simon Cozens (Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka SUFES, 2011), 147.

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