

Models of Ministry with the Transient Urban Poor
By Andrew Ng and Michael Crane

Published: Ng, Andrew, and Michael Crane. "Models of Ministry with the Transient Poor." *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (January 2015): 58–67.

We live in a time when unprecedented numbers of people are living outside of their homeland. Whether it is for economic reasons or because of political unrest, cities are gaining migrants every day. There are now an estimated 232 million international migrants (UN News 2013). Refugees are also among the transient. Over half of the world's fifteen million refugees are seeking asylum in cities around the world (UNHCR 2013). These "forgotten people" are growing in numbers (Marfleet 2007). Migrant workers and refugees come to global cities as cultural outsiders, desperate and vulnerable.

Our mandate as God's people indicates we are to love the outsider just as God loves them (Deut. 10:18-19). This command to love the outsiders goes beyond mere feeding programs or church sponsored English lessons. The outsiders were incorporated into the spiritual family of God (Deut. 31:12). These transient ones originate from many of the least reached people groups in the world. Those of us working with them have discovered even the least reached can be spiritually receptive (Garrett 2012, 23). In some cases this opportunity to evangelize migrant workers has led to the spread of the gospel in their countries of origin (Lee 2009, 379).

There is an important link between migration and mission (Hanciles 2007, 226). Throughout the world there are faithful Christians who are intentionally loving migrant peoples with this kind of integral love. Here we will describe some effective models of ministry to migrants and refugees in global cities. Following a description and analysis of different models, we will extract important principles for working with these sojourning people.

Models Described

A variety of models are being used to minister and reach out to transient people in the cities. Along with each model we will attach a story that will illustrate its impact. Since many of the stories are told of people in vulnerable circumstances, names and places are omitted or changed. Each model described here is not necessarily mutually exclusive from the other models.

Education and Vocational Training

Elizabeth and her two sons are refugees who made their way to Southeast Asia. Elizabeth only speaks her mother tongue, and, therefore, cannot find any work to support her family. Given their limited finances, her two sons cannot go to school. It is already obvious that her two preteen sons are three years behind in their educational development. Furthermore, they are bored with nothing to do and are getting to the age where they can start to get into serious trouble.

Refugee families arrive in a new country with few job choices and minimal educational options for the children. In many nations refugees lack the basic rights of legal employment. In their desperate state they are forced to work in exploited circumstances which often brings further harm to the family. With some training in a vocational skill and learning the language of the marketplace, their job options improve dramatically. Refugee children are often barred from the local public schools and cannot afford any of the private schooling options. Ministries adopting this model have responded to these two major felt needs. Some have established vocational training for newly

arrived refugees and migrant workers. Others have set up informal schools seeking to give the next generation opportunities for the future. These ministries are able to meet critical needs of the families which also establishes a relational bridge to minister in other ways, including evangelism, discipleship, and counselling.

For this model to be effective, it takes a sophisticated level of organization and coordination. This is not a short-term strategy; rather, it involves a heavy commitment from a strong core of volunteers. In places where this model works well, expertise is drawn from the refugee community to do some of the training and educating of its own people.

Community Center

In a city with a large number of Nepali migrant workers a ministry runs a community drop-in center open to Nepalis who need a place to go for a night or two. Even the Nepali embassy recommends the center to Nepalis who have nowhere to go. Through this ministry many Nepalis have been touched by Christian love, and it has resulted in a number of churches.

Many migrant workers come from village-based agrarian societies. While agricultural work is hard, it is seasonal in nature, meaning, there are times for working hard and times for resting and socializing. Many of the migrant workers coming to Asia's large cities are put to work in factories and construction. Many are expected to work six or even seven days a week in 10 to 12 hour shifts. The stress is unbearable with no place to find solace.

The community center model creates a space for these people to meet up with others from their home country. It is a place where they can speak their mother tongue, eat their favorite foods, and be culturally relaxed. It becomes a mutual support group where they can be encouraged and interact among themselves, meeting up with friends and have a sense of home away from home. This model works best with a believer from the same people group who lives there and intentionally shares the gospel and makes disciples with those coming in and out of the community center. This is a very relational model that allows believers to engage their own people in a neutral context rather than a formal church service or direct witnessing encounter. Discipleship is also able to address holistic life issues.

Event-Based Ministries

Last year a famous singer from Myanmar who is a Christian travelled to several Southeast Asian cities and performed concerts for large crowds of migrant workers and refugees from Myanmar. This event drew many non-Christians and provided an opportunity to hear the gospel. When migrant workers leave their home countries to live in a place where they are anonymous, they feel more free to try things that were forbidden in their home country. Many coming from other religious backgrounds are interested in attending a Christian conference or concert. Other events might be a sporting event or a holiday celebration.

The value of the event-based model is the potential to attract big crowds to hear the gospel. In some cases many make decisions to become Christians, but follow-up is often difficult or neglected. With larger crowds, it is difficult to develop relationships with all those who attend these events. On the positive side, these kinds of events can also be a source of encouragement to the migrant Christian community. Many face long hours of mundane work, so a special event can provide a nice break from drudgery. It can also serve as a way to discern those most interested in the gospel.

Evangelistic Church Planting

Matthew and Rosalie fled their home country because of the political conditions there. They arrived in the new country seeking asylum as refugees. They arrived without any knowledge of any other language than their own, but were fortunate to find jobs working in a restaurant serving food to others from the same country. In the restaurant they heard the gospel from a frequent customer who invited them to an English speaking church. They became believers through their friend but could not understand anything in the English speaking church. Their growth as new believers was stunted until they could be part of a church of others who spoke their language.

This model of planting churches among each migrant group can be very effective in evangelising and discipling those from other nations. Due to language and culture differences with their destination country, there is a need for churches that are started by and for each transient people group. Church planting of this type takes place in a variety of ways, but two primary approaches are most common:

- 1) *Traditional Churches Gathered Around a Worship Service*- These are churches that have a larger gathering of worshippers usually with a pastor and others leading from the front of the congregation. This kind of church planting most easily happens through the use of church buildings and is more common among those migrant/refugee groups coming from Christian roots. These churches can be started all over the city where there are large numbers of a particular people group. These churches provide community and discipleship for Christians and can be very effective in reaching near-culture people groups who are not yet Christians. This model, however, is more reliant on theologically trained pastors and benevolent national churches offering the use of their sanctuaries.
- 2) *Underground House Churches Gathered Around Home Meetings*- The other primary model is the planting of house churches that have smaller and lower-key gatherings. This model might be chosen for a number of different reasons. One reason might be due to the level of persecution directed at Christians among the particular people group. Another might be due to the lack of established churches in the host country. A third reason might be due to a missiological strategy of starting churches that are simple and reproducible enough that participant migrant workers can start churches when they return to their home countries. This is the primary method used to start churches among migrant people groups who do not have a Christian heritage.

Both of these methods are used for good effect in evangelizing migrant workers and refugees. The model is reliant on having wise pastoral leadership of these churches. In some cases, the attention given to conducting church gatherings might reduce the ability to provide deeper relational discipleship and holistic care.

Training Laborers From Among the Transient

Kinsey once lived in a restricted access nation in Asia. After she was barred by the government from living there, she came to a nearby global city where she could have access to thousands of migrant workers and refugees from that restricted nation. Among those from that country were some who were from Christian people groups and many who were from unreached people groups. She started a certificate training program associated with a local seminary to equip those who are already Christians in basic doctrine, evangelism, discipleship, and small group facilitation. Her program balances between head knowledge and practice. In addition to learning the Bible better, the students are required to pair up to start new cell groups and actively share the gospel with those who have never heard it.

This final model relies on the training of migrant workers and/or refugees with the basic skills to be effective in evangelism, discipleship, church starting, and pastoral care. Many of the transient urban dwellers from other nations do not speak the language(s) of the host nation very well, therefore equipped partners are needed from the same home countries. The model works well as an intentional way to equip migrant workers and refugees for effective ministry in their current context as well as for their future destinations (whether it is back to their home country or to their destination country as a refugee).

Models Analyzed

This list of five models of ministry to the transient urban poor is not meant to be an exhaustive catalogue of ministry models, but is intended to capture the variety of models in broad categories. Each model has strengths and weaknesses, some of which emerged as we described them. Here we will look at the models in terms of holistic effectiveness, dissemination of the gospel with discipleship, sustainability, and context.

Providing care for the transient is a complicated affair. Great resources have been developed for doing effective community development work in established communities (Linthicum 1991; Fikkert and Corbett 2009; Perkins 1996). Often these methods build on the assumption that there is an established social network in the community and that the community has enough capacity to work out solutions to their problems. Migrant workers and refugees often have little control over their circumstances because they are at the mercy of employers and/or government restrictions on their activities in the host country. There are also tendencies for the transient to develop some unhealthy behavioural patterns that they would not develop in their home countries (e.g. cohabitation with the opposite gender, substance abuse). Highly relational community centers, vocational training, and education for the children take intentional steps to address these physical and social concerns. Occasional events makes long-term help in these matters difficult. The starting of churches and training of workers can overlook these concerns or be ill-equipped to handle them.

The majority of these migrant workers and refugees are from unreached people groups coming from restricted access nations. Their presence in global cities offers an opportunity to share the gospel with them and make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18-20). Vocational training, education, and community centers often face greater restrictions on unencumbered evangelism and discipleship. Some events are intentionally organized in order to share the gospel widely, but often fail to effectively make disciples of Jesus. The starting of healthy churches is more effective in sharing the gospel and discipling believers. Training and equipping believers for effective evangelism and discipleship can have a multiplicative effect on the spread of the gospel and provides a deeper level of discipleship for those being trained simultaneously.

Model	Holistic Effectiveness	Dissemination of the Gospel with Discipleship	Sustainability
<i>Education and Vocational Training</i>	Most effective	Least effective	Most resources needed
<i>Community Center</i>	Effective	Less effective	Resources needed
<i>Event-Based Ministries</i>	Not effective	Partially effective	Resources needed
<i>Evangelistic Church Planting</i>	Less effective	Effective	Fewer resources needed
<i>Training Laborers From Among the Transient</i>	Least effective	Most effective	Some resources needed.

Due to the transient nature of migrant workers and refugees, a ministry among them cannot reach the same level of sustainability that a ministry in an established community can have. Even so, some of the models require more continuous resources than others. Establishing schools and community centers requires ongoing financial resources as well as volunteers' time. Special events need to be planned, marketed, and carried out which requires resources. Starting churches and training others for ministry is more sustainable (as long as pastors are not being supported from outside sources).

Context plays a very important role in deciding which model would work best in each place. By context we are referring to a number of variables such as: host city, people group of the transient, and resource potential. The governing authorities of each host city can determine the degree to which each model is possible. For example, in some nations the physical needs of refugees are provided for by the government, but not their spiritual needs. In other locations, openly Christian activities are restricted. The people groups of the migrant groups can also help determine the best model. As mentioned previously, some people groups have a greater need for social connectivity which makes the community center a good choice. Other people groups, particularly those coming from highly oppressive governments may have very little trust for each other, requiring a different model that allows trust to be developed. And finally, the resource potential must be evaluated in each place. Running a school requires stable financial support and a strong core of volunteers. The event-based model can operate more easily on sporadic funding. Each ministry seeking to minister to the transient urban poor will have to evaluate their context.

Principles Gleaned from the Various Models

No matter what model you use, there are timeless principles that guide our work with the transient urban poor. In fact, these principles might help determine which model you use in your ministry.

Honest Assessment of Needs and Felt Needs

It can be tempting to make assumptions about the needs of the transient poor. Our first step is to listen, observe, and listen some more to the ones who need help. Their needs may not always be physical. Many asylum seekers around the world arrive in cities with no contacts and with no one they can trust from their home country. Emotional needs can be just as important as the physical ones. Only with a correct assessment of their needs can we go about helping in a manner that leads to self-sustainability in their new, albeit temporary, home.

Intentional Proclamation and Demonstration of the Gospel

It is the gospel that compels us to love the transient poor and the gospel that is a source of hope for them. Any of our models of ministry must include an intentional plan for the demonstration and proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus can meet their needs in ways we simply cannot on our own.

Contextualization

Migrant workers and refugees come from diverse cultures and worldview backgrounds. Ministry models that work with one group may not work at all with another group. In everything we do—helping them meet their needs, sharing the gospel, making disciples—we must learn about their cultural and religious background and adapt our words and actions so that the unchanging truth of the gospel message can be maximally understood, embraced, and spread to others.

Equip Them to Thrive as Disciples Anywhere

Recently Andrew went to visit former migrant workers from Vietnam. He was pleasantly surprised to discover former Vietnamese migrant workers who have returned to their home country and shared the gospel among their own people and have begun to start churches in their home villages. They did not feel the need to wait for a missionary or church planter to come to their village. They were already equipped to start churches for themselves. Another couple who met in Andrew's ministry married each other and have gone to a different Southeast Asian country as cross-cultural missionaries. The methods of discipleship used while they were migrant workers were strategically designed to equip them to thrive as disciple-makers wherever they go in the world.

Conclusion

The nations are coming to cities all around the world. Many people are arriving in very humble circumstances and are only there temporarily. This can be an incredible opportunity for the church to impact the least-reached of the world by developing intentional ministries to serve, disciple, and equip them as life-long followers of Christ.

Works Cited

- Fikkert, Brian, and Steve Corbett. 2009. *When Helping Hurts: Alleviating Poverty Without Hurting the Poor. . .and Ourselves*. Chicago: Moody Publishers.
- Garrett, Bob. 2012. "The Next Frontier: The Implications for Missions of Global Urbanization in the Twenty-First Century." In *Reaching the City: Reflections on Urban Mission for the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Gary Fujino, Timothy R. Sisk, and Tereso C. Casino, 19–34. Evangelical Missiological Society Series 20. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library.
- Hanciles, J. J. 2007. "Migration." Edited by John Corrie. *Dictionary of Mission Theology: Evangelical Foundations*. Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press.
- Lee, Myunghee. 2009. "Migrant Workers' Churches as Welcoming, Sending and Recruiting Entities: A Case Study of Mongolian Migrant Workers' Churches in Korea." In *Missions from the Majority World: Progress, Challenges, and Case Studies*, edited by Enoch Wan and Michael Pocock, 371–385. Evangelical Missiological Society Series 17. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library.
- Linthicum, Robert C. 1991. *Empowering the Poor: Community Organizing Among the City's Rag, Tag and Bobtail*. Monrovia, CA: MARC.
- Marfleet, Philip. 2007. "'Forgotten,' 'Hidden': Predicaments of the Urban Refugee." *Refuge* 24 (1): 36–45.
- Perkins, John M., ed. 1996. *Restoring At-Risk Communities: Doing It Together and Doing It Right*. Baker Books.
- UN News. 2013. "Number of International Migrants Rises above 232 Million." *United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs*. September 11. <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/news/population/number-of-international-migrants-rises.html>.
- UNHCR. 2013. "Refugee Figures." *UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency*. <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c1d.html>.