

Global Immigration, the Role of Cities, and the Strategic Positioning of the Urban Church

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There are languages spoken today that are only preserved in cities outside of the countries of origin. In cities around the world, cities are where one can hear dozens, even hundreds, of languages spoken. Some estimate more than 800 languages are spoken in New York City alone.² The many tongues spoken in cities points to that fact that cities draw the nations to them. The blending of cultures, languages, ideas, and talents is what makes the city a marvel. Babylon, during the time of Jewish exile in the Old Testament (see Jer 29:1-3), fully understood the advantage of bringing the nations to the city. They not only brought Jews from Jerusalem, but also brought Syrians, Egyptians, and others in order to capitalize on the unique skills and knowledge from each culture.³

As the nations flow in and out of cities, it is imperative for the church to be alert to the realities of global migration (in all its forms) and imagine ways in which the church can respond. Since global migration is such a broad group, this paper will focus more heavily on refugees, asylum seekers, and economic migrants. Here we will cover the realities of migration to cities, the realities of migrants in cities, and ways for the church to respond.

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² Rebecca Solnit and Joshua Jelly-Schapiro, *Nonstop Metropolis: A New York City Atlas* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2016).

³ I. Eph'al, "The Western Minorities in Babylonia in the 6th-5th Centuries B.C.: Maintenance and Cohesion," *Orientalia* 47, no. 1, NOVA SERIES (January 1978): 80.

Realities of Migration to Cities

Every hour eight thousand people pick up their lives and move to a city. Cities are growing at break-neck speed around the world. Urbanization rates are highest in Asia and Africa (due in part because Europe, and South and North America are already highly urban).⁴ This urbanization is not only rural-urban migration within a nation, more and more people are flowing across borders. Most migration is south-south migration.⁵ People are on the move for many reasons. For some, the reasons are primarily economic. For others, the need for safety is the cause. For almost everyone, the situation is complex.

Those who leave their homes for reasons of safety are at an all-time high (82.4 million according to the UN). Of those who are seeking asylum or registered as refugees, more than half are in cities. There was a time when all officially refugees were placed in camps (many still are), but more and more are in cities having to secure their own shelter and livelihood. Those who are in refugee camps, some are in camps so large they function like cities with an internal economy and social structure. Of the millions and millions who are forcibly displaced from their home countries, less than one percent are ever officially resettled in a new country. This means that over 99% of the world's refugees are never resettled.⁶ Many remain in a state of legal limbo in a landing city with little hope of obtaining legal status.⁷ Cities like Istanbul, Turkey, Amman, Jordan, and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia have each received hundreds of thousands of refugees. Uganda and Kenya host so many refugees that they created refugee cities. "Mass movements of refugees are seldom welcome, unless they fulfil a specific economic or ideological function, and states may go to great lengths to exclude incomers and/or to isolate them from the wider society."⁸

Those who leave their homes for economic reasons are not considered refugees by the UN definition,⁹ but seen it necessary to leave the country for work to support their families. Cities such as Doha and Dubai have larger populations of international migrants than local citizens. However, it is common in cities around the world to find significant populations of migrant laborers working in low-wage industries. Similar to the plight of refugees, many economic

⁴ Michael D. Crane, "Emerging Global Cities and the Tilt of Influence" (Presented at the RGCN Global Consortium, Abu Dhabi: Radius Global, 2020), <https://radiusglobal.org/resource/emerging-global-cities-and-the-tilt-of-influence/>.

⁵ Mechteld Jansen, "Christian Migrants and the Theology of Space and Place," in *Contested Spaces, Common Ground: Space and Power Structures in Contemporary Multireligious Societies*, ed. Ulrich Winkler, Lidia Rodriguez Fernandez, and Oddbjorn Leirvik (Leiden; Boston: Brill Rodopi, 2017), 148.

⁶ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Resettlement," *UNHCR*, last modified 2016, accessed May 30, 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/resettlement.html>.

⁷ For more on the process for urban refugees see: Michael D. Crane, "Refugees in the Urban Wilderness: Plight of Refugees in Landing Cities and Opportunities for Response," in *Migration, Mission and Ministry: An Introduction*, ed. Robert Chao Romero and Stephen E. Burris (Skyforest, CA: Urban Loft Publishers, 2021), 257–274.

⁸ Philip Marfleet, "'Forgotten,' 'Hidden': Predicaments of the Urban Refugee," *Refuge* 24, no. 1 (2007): 36.

⁹ According to the UN, a refugee is "someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence." "What Is a Refugee," *USA for UNHCR*, 2016, accessed May 23, 2016, <http://www.unrefugees.org/what-is-a-refugee/>.

migrants end up in situations that are exploitative or worse. Many migrant workers sign on to work with many promises made. Wages, work hours, and a legal working visa are often not what they were told it would be. Many arrive to have their employers keep their passports, making them highly vulnerable and officially victims of human trafficking. As millions of people pour into cities each month, it is important that we recognize the challenging journey undertaken by those desperate for a life change.

Realities of Migrants in Cities

When migrants come to the city, many more challenges await them. The biggest challenges can be summarized in four categories: status, security, shelter, sustainable income, school. First, the legal status for migrants is a continuous challenge. Many asylum seekers and refugees in landing cities have no or little legal protection. Migrant workers sometimes are not given the promised visa or they have no possession of legal documents showing legal status. This means both groups are victims of police shakedowns or being put into a horrific detention center.

The second challenge is security. The ambiguous legal status already destabilizes the migrant. This makes them prime targets for theft and exploitation. Without a clear legal status, the migrant has few legal recourses. Domestic workers have been beaten, locked into cages, and occasionally starved to death by their employers. One serving migrant workers from India in a Southeast Asian port told of dozens crammed into a shipping container to sleep every night. Stories of migrant workers being killed because of hazardous work conditions on construction sites fill the news.

Third, shelter is yet another challenge for those arriving in cities. This is particularly the case for refugees. Unlike the refugee camps depicted in the movies, urban refugees must find their own place to live. This means renting a place that is affordable, which often means sharing with other families. Finding viable shelter requires money, which leads to the fourth challenge, sustainable income. Living in a city requires money. Rent, transportation, food, medical care all cost money. This means migrants need to be able to earn enough to pay for these things and if they have a family, the cost rises. Migrant workers need to earn enough to pay for necessities in the city and save enough to send home to support relatives there. Migrant workers have little control over their income because their visa is tied to a specific employer and refugees are often not allowed to work in any official capacity. This means they have no other choice but to work in the informal economy, adding to their vulnerability.

Those who arrive to the city with children have an additional challenge: school for their children. Many nations prohibit non-local children from attending local schools. International schools are often prohibitively expensive. Refugees may spend several years or decades stuck in limbo. Migrant workers may also have children who need an affordable option for education with few solutions.

Those who have migrated to cities through economic pressures or forcible displacement face a long, hard journey with multifaceted challenges. Many of these challenges are out of the control of the refugee or migrant, yet they have to face the consequences. Even though urban migration for the underprivileged is an uphill battle, we can also see human resilience along the way and God's provision at each turn. This transience and vulnerability is not new to our era, rather it is as old as humanity. Much of the biblical narrative follows God's people on the move, having to place ultimate faith in God at every point.¹⁰

Ways for the Church to Respond to Urban Migration

Christians are called to love our neighbors as ourselves (Lev. 19:18; Matt 22:37-38; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:25-37). We do not choose our neighbors. Throughout the Bible, God's people are called upon to consider others as worthy of dignity and kindness. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, it is important to note that the man travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho was stripped of anything that communicated his class or ethnic identity. These were not prerequisites for offering care. The command to love our neighbor is not bound by passport, ethnic background, or class. We are to love indiscriminately.

Before any thought can be given to action or response, the global Christian community needs a restored ethical compass on this issue. Media and politics have decimated any hope of moral high ground for the sake of self-serving victories. Well-known sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman observed the moral impact on the wider population: "another tragedy—one born of callous unconcern and more blindness lies in wait to strike."¹¹ The church should have such high regard for the dignity of all, that they should rise to be leaders in concern for those traversing borders.

There is no cookie cutter method or golden key to Christian response to urban migration. Each church/ministry will have to evaluate the needs/opportunities, their context, and their assets. What is the size of the migrant population in the city? What are the laws regarding migrant populations? What are the attitudes regarding migrants in the city? What are the needs of migrants in the city? What can the church do? What can the migrants do? These are questions that are just the beginning.

Aid

Migrants arriving in a new city with limited resources often need immediate help. A clear aspect of the biblical mandate to care for the sojourners among us regards seeing to their physical and social needs. The church in each of these cities is blessed with many resources that can be used for these who have been forced from their homelands. Refugees often do not have the means with which to see to their own needs due to language obstacles, legal restrictions, and a lack of funds. The church can respond in a number of ways.

¹⁰ Frederick A. Norwood, *Strangers and Exiles: A History of Religious Refugees, Vol. I* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), 21.

¹¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Strangers at Our Door* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2016), 2.

The starting point is to gain an understanding of the needs. One easy way to do this is to network with the local UNHCR office, NGOs, and local aid organizations. The needs of these refugees is far beyond what any organization can handle; therefore, an offer of help is usually welcomed. Through collaboration, the impact on refugee lives is multiplied.¹² Once there is an understanding of the needs, the church can assess her resources that will help meet the needs. Similar to serving in any under-resourced community, it is best to work collaboratively with the community to ensure the help rendered is actually helpful.¹³

The church should consider helping with needs that are not easily met by individuals. Some ministries try to deliver a small amount of food to refugee families, but they would rather be able to work to earn their own income. Churches can provide help in finding work (the church in a city is a surprisingly vast network), vocational training, and teaching the trade language(s) necessary to work in the city. Christian business owners might consider hiring refugees and ensuring fair wages and work hours.

Advocacy

In many of these cities there is a risk in helping refugees. Since many of the landing cities are in countries that are not signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the international community has little input into refugee rights in those countries. For example, refugees in Malaysia or Thailand have no legal status. This means Malaysian or Thai citizens who help refugees are themselves in grey legal area. However, if the biblical calling is to help refugees, that overrides earthly legality.

One important way the church in these landing cities can respond is through advocacy both via legal channels as well as at a grassroots level. Refugees, due to their limited legal status, have few options to appeal to the government structures of the host countries. Christian lawyers and political representatives can work for changes in laws, as well as strive to shine a light on police and immigration exploitation, which is so rampant in many of the landing cities. When there are specific legal cases involving refugees, Christian lawyers can provide counsel and representation.

On a grassroots level, the church can help other citizens understand the plight of urban refugees and call for a change in how the public treats refugees. Refugees are often exploited by landlords, employers, and other power-holders. The church should take the lead in promoting just rental agreements, adherence to employment laws, and safe passage for refugees throughout the city. Even in multicultural cities like these landing cities, many people

¹² Brad Coath et al., “You Took Me In’: Seeking Transformation for Migrant Workers, Refugees, and Asylum Seekers,” in *Signs of Hope in the City: Renewing Urban Mission, Embracing Radical Hope*, ed. Graham Hill (Melbourne: ISUM, 2015), 76.

¹³ See Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett, *When Helping Hurts: Alleviating Poverty Without Hurting the Poor. . .and Ourselves* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 2009.

operate out of xenophobia and a lack of trust (Bauman, 2016, p. 13).¹⁴ Christians can be advocates for refugees as a viable segment of the city's population.

Access to Education and Employment Opportunities

*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.*¹⁵

Another way the church can help is through education. In Kuala Lumpur there are over a hundred rag-tag schools/learning centers for refugee children. During the years refugees spend in landing cities, they need educational alternatives for the children. Many churches are already involved in several ways. Some churches provide classroom space for refugee children to study. In addition, Christians can volunteer to teach the kids or help secure school books and other necessities for these schools. If children miss five years of education, it could be devastating for their adjustment in the resettlement country.¹⁶

A Spiritual Community

The church is called to make disciples of every nation (Matt. 28:18-20). This mandate certainly includes seeing to the spiritual welfare of refugees. Deuteronomy clearly indicates we are to include refugees and other people in transition in our spiritual community (31:12). Similar to the physical and social welfare of refugees, the church needs to first spend time understanding the spiritual needs of a refugee community. Some refugees come from places where gospel witness is suppressed and the greatest need is evangelism. Other refugees come from a deeply rooted Christian background. And yet others are fleeing persecution due to their Christian faith. In every case we want to make disciples and foster healthy churches. But in each case the starting point will differ.

Refugees coming from places where there is very little gospel witness will need people who can lovingly and patiently share the gospel with them. This can be a wonderful opportunity to share the gospel with those from countries few Christians can enter. We do need to be mindful that persecution can persist even within a particular community which has fled to a landing city. If

¹⁴ Bauman, *Strangers at Our Door*, 13.

¹⁵ Andrew Ng and Michael Crane, "Models of Ministry with the Transient Poor," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (January 2015): 58–67.

¹⁶ See further: Michael D. Crane, "The Vital Role of Faith Communities in the Lives of Urban Refugees," *International Journal of Interreligious and Intercultural Studies* 3, no. 2 (December 2020): 31.

people from a particular nation repeatedly come to a particular city, churches should be ready with Bibles and other materials in the refugee's language. Those who come to faith in Jesus may then be able to share the gospel among their own people.

Those who are Christians leaving an environment of heavy persecution may lack sufficient discipleship. We worked with one young man who was involved in distributing Christian literature in his home country and, when he discovered he was going to be arrested, left immediately. When my wife and I met with him, we soon discovered he knew very little about the Christian faith even though he was being persecuted for it. This time of transition for refugees can be a critical time of discipleship. There is a need for mature Christians willing to invest their time with these refugees.

Other refugees come from places where the church is already quite developed. For example, in Southeast Asia there are many refugees coming from tribes in Myanmar that are majority Christian (i.e. Chin, Karen, and Kachin tribes all have heavily Christian populations). For many refugees, the distractions and temptations of city life can draw people away from spiritual vitality. There is a need for the planting of healthy churches and biblically solid leadership development.¹⁷ I have found that refugee churches can become wonderful partners in trying to engage the rest of the city with the gospel. And refugee churches become an important community hub that serves the greater refugee community.¹⁸

Whether we are sharing the gospel with someone who is hearing for the first time or equipping a mature Christian with leadership skills, there are vital opportunities to make disciples who make disciples (2 Tim. 2:2). The church must be careful that it does not focus on either the physical needs or the spiritual needs alone. Loving the refugees in our midst means showing concern about them physically *and* spiritually. But we also need to remember that other organizations might do a better job of addressing their physical needs, but the church has a responsibility to meet the spiritual needs. This time of transition can be pivotal for refugees' spiritual growth. Returning to the example of Israel in the wilderness, Bruce Waltke observes: "In short, lacking normal human structures of society and life and confronted with the hostility of the environment and enemies, Israel finds its life in God."¹⁹

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¹⁷ Michael D. Crane, "Equipping the Transient for Ministry in a Global City," *The New Urban World Journal* 3, no. 1 (May 2014): 7–15.

¹⁸ David Ley, "The Immigrant Church as an Urban Service Hub," *Urban Studies* 45, no. 10 (September 1, 2008): 2057–2074.

¹⁹ Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 540.

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