

Miles, Meters, and Markers on the Refugee Highways and Corridors: A New Look at the Forcibly (and Voluntarily) Displaced Through the Lenses of Cities and Big Data

By Minh Ha Nguyen¹, PhD © 2022

Abstract

The forced (and voluntary) migration² is a long-term, multifaceted, and complex process, often rocky and chaotic, and sometimes violent leaving scars and trauma on the young and vulnerable. The global refugee crisis has ignited not only public debates surrounding who should be allowed to enter but also compassion, concern, and care from the Christian church in nearly every country and city that has seen an influx of refugees and asylum seekers. Yet, the focus has often been on what happens to the migrants at the country and city of destination and not enough on the countries and cities of origin and transit. Furthermore, there is an inordinate amount of attention given to the responses by the Christian church in the host countries while overlooking or bypassing the work done by the migrant Christians themselves. Further still, many responses lack comprehensive view of migration as God-ordained and missional phenomenon. This paper therefore seeks, through a personal story, to address these complex issues first, by providing a framework for seeing and understanding the forced (and voluntary) migration from an ecological perspective. Second, it tells the story of Christian migrants seeking missionally the peace of cities where God had sent them, making disciples, and planting church not only among their people group but also all other ethnic groups in the city and beyond. Finally, it introduces methods and processes that tap into big data to identify migration highways and urban nodes in the global cities network. Doing so, the paper hopes to help the Christian church in the city avoid the uncritical, one-sided, biased, and ideological understandings of migration but give priority to the migrant people created in God's image and minister to them not just in the countries and cities of destination but also on the migration highways and corridors as well as in transit cities. The paper also gives the Christian church in the city church an opportunity to re-examine its approaches to engaging all peoples in every place of the city by involving and integrating the migrant church and its leaders in a comprehensive strategy. Forced (and voluntary) migration is

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² "Forced migration" is a misnomer as migration involves rational actors who are carefully weigh the costs of leaving their country of origin against the benefits of increased income, political freedom, or enhanced social ties. The forced and voluntary is not as helpful when considering from the migrant and Great Commission perspectives.

complex and chaotic but not disorganized nor incomprehensible. It is time for the body of Christ in the city to be the church of all peoples—including the migrant church—and the church for all peoples—including the ethnically, linguistically, religiously, and socioeconomically others.

I. Personal Story

Under the cloak of darkness, the frightened families and desperate bystanders climbed aboard a ramshackle fishing boat. They carried those too young or too old to walk, as well as their bundled belongings. The wooden vessel, built for 70 persons maximum, was barely afloat once all 140 souls huddled aboard. Theirs was not a voyage for fishing or fun, but an illegal journey to freedom. By leaving, they risked perils of the open sea. By staying, they risked certain death—if not physically, at least emotionally and spiritually—at the hands of the Viet Cong. Rather than living with the prospect of blacklists, merciless torture and “Circle of Hell” prison camps, these brave Vietnamese families endeavored to escape.

As the boat’s jerry-rigged van-motor wrenched them from their homeland, the not-too-distant beach filled with lights and shouts of enraged police. Gunshots sought out victims, but to no avail. The now-refugees had barely escaped bullets’ reach, barely escaped Communist threat. Safe departure was their first miracle, but relief was short-lived. The next six days, these “boat people” endured more hardship than most Americans face in a lifetime. By day two, there was no drinking water. By day three, all food was gone. And, as if luck had totally abandoned them, day five delivered a devastating storm. Incessant rain poured into the boat faster than everyone could bail. To avoid sinking, they threw overboard all their worldly possessions. Anything not breathing had to go, even the navigational equipment.

The story should end here, but for another miracle. The refugees survived nature’s onslaught and shortly thereafter, happened upon an Australian oil rig off the coast of Malaysia. The crew provided them lifesaving water and food, and then directed them onward to Malaysia. Finally, the weathered, yet hopeful passengers reached land ... only to be denied entry. The stress and disappointment were so intense that one man attempted (unsuccessfully) to commit suicide. And then, yet another miracle ensued. The Malaysian governor happened to pass by, saw the ruckus and delivered timely news. The “boat people” could stay due to their refugee status, based on a resolution passed just two days prior by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

I was 11 years old at the time of this story, and the suicidal man was my father. My six siblings and I relived the terrifying events through horrific nightmares over the next several years. My people and generations before endured harsh persecution and isolation. But God was in this all the time, every time. My family survived, including my father: a Christian evangelical pastor whom the Communists had previously abducted, imprisoned and persecuted for his faith. My parents believed God had a plan for us. If we all died, if we all lived, we all stayed together. I thank God for that. We yearned for freedom in America, where we could worship God and build new lives, but God opened other doors. A Swiss church provided financial support for our

relocation and visas. So, we ended up in Switzerland instead. For the next 13 years, I lived in the beautiful Alpine country, where I was educated, obtained citizenship, and served in the Army.

I also made another significant decision during that time: I committed my life to Christ and his cause. The night I accepted Christ, I had a vision of the hand of God. He was pulling up the boat we used to escape Vietnam and I knew God was with us in the stormy seas. That memory really affirmed my life. I was supposed to die, but lived because God saved us. He was faithful. My father remained faithful, too, traveling Switzerland and Southern Germany to locate other Vietnamese refugees so they could share life and faith in their new land and start new churches. Eventually, my father pastored Switzerland's Vietnamese Evangelical Church, never realizing he also was mentoring me for future kingdom service.

Years later, I was called to full-time ministry. I attended Emmaus Bible College near Lausanne, Switzerland, where I met my future wife, Corinne. We married, and in 1993, my childhood dream was realized when we relocated to America for graduate school. Today, we live in Richmond, Virginia, along with our two American-born daughters, Lois and Wendelyn. Corinne achieved a master's degree in teaching English as a foreign language, which she applies as an adjunct professor at a local community college and the Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. I completed a Master of Divinity degree in 1997, and more recently, a Master of Theology degree and a Doctor of Philosophy degree. Today, I work full-time at the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention and direct the Radius Global Cities Network, a think tank that focuses on the issues of globalization, urbanization, and mass migration in order to provide missional IQ for the global church to engage the urban contexts of the twenty-first century.

My 12,000-mile migrant journey took me from Vietnam to Malaysia to Switzerland and then finally to the United States. Along the way, I have found more than a place to call home. I found a Savior. I found purpose. I found hope and meaning. Migration, be it internally or internationally, forced or voluntary, is divinely orchestrated and can become missional for the purpose of God for the nations and the glory of God and his coming kingdom. I have been an internally displaced person (IDP), an asylum seeker, a "boat people" refugee, an international student on F-1 visa, a migrant worker on H1-B visa, and a "green card" resident alien. I know what it is like to be a "stateless person" and I also know what it is like to own multiple passports. I have seen the horrors of war, the sleepless nights waiting for the visa to be approved, and the unsettled feeling about the uncertain future. I am telling my personal story because most migrations—contrary to common belief—is orderly and organized. Migration could also be good because it was ordained by God (Acts 17:27, Gen 1:28).³ God wants to meet people in their migration. God wants to meet them in the city (Rev 21:1–3). God designs and builds a city to meet his people and dwell with them (Heb 11:10).

³ Acts 17:27 - "His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him—though he is not far from any one of us."

II. Framework for Seeing and Understanding the Forced (and Voluntary) Migration Process

One way to understand forced migration (and any other type of migration) is the concepts of first mile, last mile, and transit locations. I am borrowing these concepts in my study of globalization and from the *supply chain* flow and transportation system. In refugee ministry, the focus has often been on the last mile and not enough on the transit locations and the first mile.

First Mile

Drivers of forced migration are multiple and complex. The decision to migrate or to stay depends on factors at the macro-level, meso-level, and the micro-level. At the macro-level, it could be political conflict, religious persecution, or ethnic and social discrimination. At the meso-level, migration factors may include social networks, cost of leaving, or relationships with people abroad. At the micro-level, the factors may include individual characteristics, ethnic identity, religion, or education level. Understanding the conflicts and threats that displace people from their home country and city as well as knowing their relational network and personal characteristics is key in ministering to the forcibly displaced people. If a minority group has been victimized, then identify the actors performing the threats could help build relationship with members of the group. Furthermore, forced migration is often accompanied by the internal displacement from the rural areas or from one city to another.

First mile factors for consideration in the comprehensive strategy include:

- Political conflict, religious persecution, ethnic and social discrimination
- Social networks, cost of leaving, or relationships with people abroad
- Ethnic identity, religion, or education level

In our situation, the planning to escape our home country Vietnam took almost four years to complete. Religious persecution and social discrimination against Christians were the drivers that forced us to leave.

Transit Nodes

A transit node could either be a refugee camp or a city. Today, there are 60% of refugees in urban areas and 30% in rural camps. The remainder 10% are in informal shelters, war zones, or the jungle. Keep in mind also that the average duration of transit time is about 20 years and often involve multiple cities or camps throughout the transit period. During transit, the forcibly displaced people often await the official refugee status. Rejected ones could face deportation or attempt to move to the next country and city and seek asylum status again. They become the stranded migrants.

Other factors impacting forced migrants in transit include: the national policy of the country where forced migrants are in transit could also impact their journey. Access to support

and settlement options from relatives or other compatriots could also contribute to their decision-making to stay or leave the transit nodes. The financial resources and sufficient funds could play a major role as well. Finally, border closures due to global pandemic such as COVID-19 also impacts refugees in transit. We have seen that during the first 6 months of 2020, asylum applications dropped by 33% from the previous year's level.

Transit factors for consideration in the comprehensive strategy include:

- Asylum request status along with the migration policy of host country
- Average transit time combined with access to social network and resources
- Irregular or stranded situation requiring legal and financial assistance

It is important to identify typical transit cities along with destination and origin cities on the refugee highway. It has been noted that capital cities and large cities in the Western World tend to be destination cities. Southern European cities and cities in developing countries tend to be transit cities.

In transit, we may find also people moving in irregular manner exposing themselves to danger and abuses or becoming stranded for long periods of time while *en route* to their destination needing legal and/or financial help. Map of transportation options, cost, frequency, and hazards are also needed. Maybe big data could help us in these areas.

Finally, we need to seek out Christ's disciples on the refugee highway and disciple them to make disciples. How do we make disciple and plant churches among refugees in transit? What are the challenges and joys of walking along their side during their sojourn in our city? How do we inform the city teams that are on the next node about refugees in transit that are coming their way? What if we could identify origin, transit, and destination cities on the refugee highway and keep this information constantly fresh?

Last Mile

Last mile ministry approaches are already quite well-known. From an urbanization perspective, typically, refugees do not have a choice to what city to resettle in but the decision is made by government authorities at the national or city level. After a short period of time, however, with improved language efficiency and financial independence, they could choose to relocate to another area of the city or to another city. Factors influencing these decision include education background, social network, and local support.

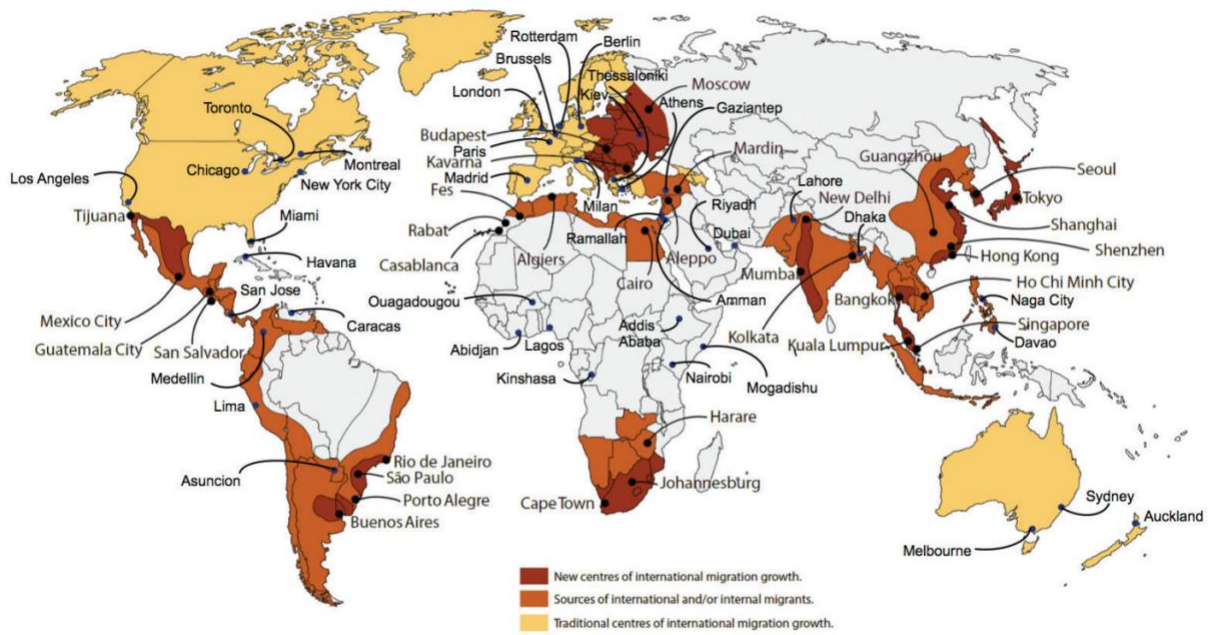
Within the city, refugees and migrants typically enter via ethnic corridors, areas of ethnic concentration from interior to urban edge. With language efficiency and financial independence, they begin to move in three directions. First, to the suburb. Second, to an ethnic enclave. And third, to an ethnoburb.

Last mile factors for consideration in the comprehensive strategy include:

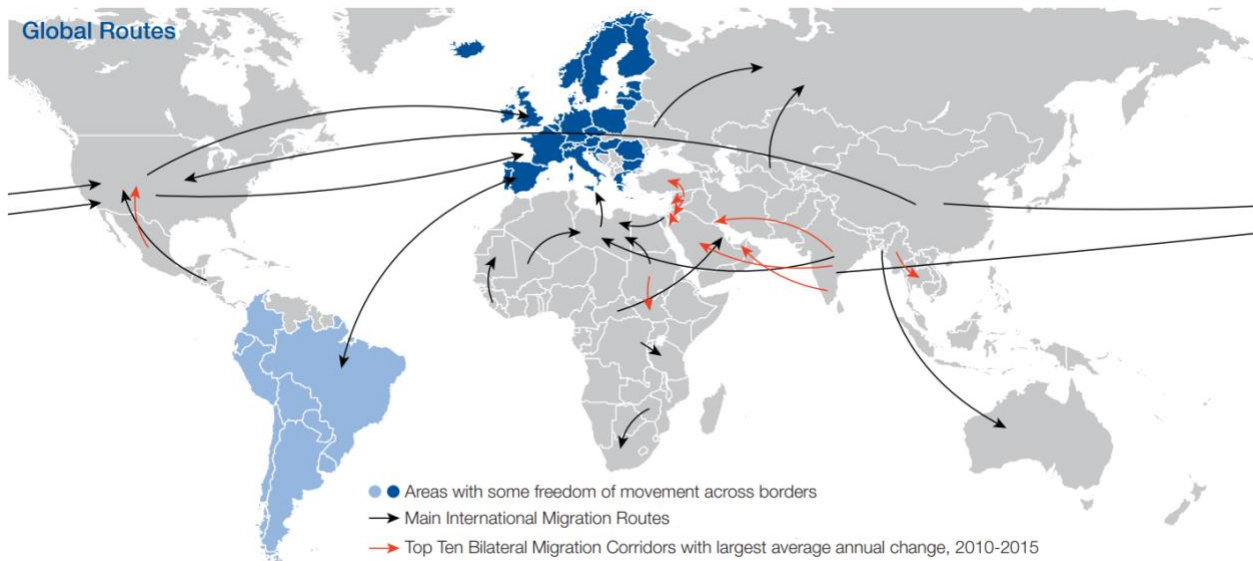
- Better-known issues of refugee resettlement and integration—and often the only focus of refugee ministry
- Access to affordable housing, jobs, educational opportunities, and use of new technologies to access services
- Ethnic corridors, suburbs, enclaves/ghettos, and ethnoburbs

To engage global cities with high refugee population, we need to, first, engage them comprehensively on the whole refugee highway and not just at the last mile. Sometimes, we need to go even beyond the first mile to under the first meter that sends them on the migration highway. We need to engage them in transit and prepare them for a successful landing at the host destination. Second, we need to pay attention to the most vulnerable. Cities are not the most safe places for women and children. We need to be thoughtful in our outreach to these growing urban refugee segments. Third, we need to work smarter in connecting the urban nodes on the refugee highway. To do this effectively, we need to have a point of service database in order to pass the baton successfully. One team might minister to the refugee family in the home country and city. Another team might follow them in transit cities. Even another team might receive them in the destination city. What is important is that the baton is passed successfully, and the connections are made using centralized and up-to-date database. May all refugees find the Prince of Peace who gives them a place to call home and the rest of their souls as they journey to and through your city.

Global Diversification of Migration Destinations



Global Migration and Refugee Highways and Corridors



Regional Migration and Refugee Highways and Corridors

