

Evangelism and Migrants

A reflection presented by the Revd John Kafwanka on 15 February 2011 at the Anglican Communion Evangelism and Church Growth Initiative (ECGI) Core Group meeting in Kuala Lumpur, based upon: Acts 1: 3-8; Acts 6: 1-7: 59; Acts 8: 1 – 40; Acts 9: 31

Continuing with the theme of CHANGE from Bp Moon Hing's reflection yesterday (*This reflection 'Evangelism in a rapidly changing world' also appears among the resources on this web-page*), we know that change is one experience that is constant in the life of a person right from birth! Sometimes we are aware and other times we are not so much aware or appear not to be aware of the change within ourselves. It is when someone passes a comment when we realise or start internalising the reality of change.

Other times we need to be helped to change or even forced to make change – as change is not always comfortable even when we know it's a reality of being human! Bp Moon Hing yesterday observed that "We are living in a rapid changing world", but I actually wonder whether the change we are observing today is any faster than what the first Christians were experiencing, especially after the coming of the Holy Spirit.

After the Holy Spirit came among the disciples, you get the sense that things are not static but are in fact moving rather faster than even some of the disciples would have wanted to happen. The ministry in Jerusalem experiences some remarkable drama which indeed became a defining moment in the life of the Church when Stephen is killed for being a follower (or disciple) of Jesus. Of course there was no anything called a Church at the time – there were only followers of the Way!

In the first 8 chapters of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles (or indeed the Acts of the Holy Spirit, as it is some times referred to) the Gospel had been proclaimed to (or among) the Jews in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria – mostly through those disciples running away from persecution, which started with the death of Stephen. Those who ran away are now living in diaspora, but they have to bear witness to Christ, they can't withhold the Good News – after all it's on account of the Good News that they were persecuted, it's therefore worth sharing!

The blood of the martyrs and the work of the Holy Spirit gave those early disciples enough inspiration and courage to share the Good News to whomever they met (Acts 8:1-40). Judea and Samaria are two places that were not natural for the early disciples to preach the Gospel there - it was certainly not within their plan or intention that the Good News of salvation could be preached to and among the Samaritans!

Apart from the fact that it would appear natural and a lot easier for the disciples to share the news about Jesus Christ to the people they shared religion, ethnicity and language, it is also true that early disciples saw their task as to reach out among their folks. After all Jewish teaching was clear about their special relationship with God as a chosen nation, set apart from all others! The teachings on social and religious purity also meant that it was not acceptable, let alone easy to relate to people of different social (and sometimes religious status) such as the Samaritans. This was so central and entrenched that it comes out very strongly in Jesus' instructions to the 12 disciples as reported in Matt 10: 5-6.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the House of Israel."

But in fact Jesus' ministry had laid down God's intentions as confirmed both in Matthew 28 (v19) and Acts 1: 8 "...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria." The question the disciples

asked Jesus (Acts 1: 6) was quite instructive, and the answer he gave them was very striking, it went (as in many of Jesus' answers) beyond the confines of the question (Vs 7-8) and touched the "heart" of his Gospel.

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It's very interesting to note that the Gospel was in fact first preached in Samaria by a Samaritan woman who had met with Jesus at the well (John 4). Jesus himself had passed through Samaria, that is how he met with the woman at the well (Jn 4: 4 cf. Lk 17:11)! Following this encounter the woman became the first evangelist to her own people. So, Jesus and his ministry had been known or heard of in this area before the Apostles and other disciples gone there as refugees and preached and then became witnesses to the Good News of Jesus Christ. Whatever the case, the gospel was initially preached among the Jews in Jerusalem, and then among those with Jewish heritage in Samaria and Judea, but that changed as believers started sharing the Good News with those Judeans and Samaritans who had no Jewish connection and simply known as pagans!

Luke makes it very clear that it was the refugees those who fled Jerusalem and sought safety and security in Samaria and Judea, who became the agents of evangelism and church growth in these areas. Philip was especially instrumental in taking the Gospel to Samaria and through his ministry many became disciples of Jesus Christ (Acts 8: 3-40). It's especially important to note that Philip had combined both preaching and practical work including healing (works of miracle) – it was the **holistic Gospel in action** that moved people to believe. As you heard yesterday the Mission Department puts emphasis on **holistic or integral mission** as a matter of fact and biblical imperative!

What is all this to do with the trends of Christianity in world today? One of the great phenomenon of our time in the people movement, which happens due to insecurity in home cities and countries and also for economic reasons. The world is often referred to as a global village due to this great movement! The world today as provided opportunities, due to migrations (which at one time only happened in one direction – north to south, to east and west), for the Gospel to be preached by migrants among their own people but also among those whom they encounter on the daily basis outside of their ethnicity. This phenomenon is world-wide, wherever there are migrants or/and refugees or foreign students – Chinese, Nigerians, Koreans, South Americans, Ethiopians, Indians, Sudanese, Zimbabweans, Filipinos, Caribbeans, etc!

This type of evangelistic ministry naturally and understandably begins as mono-ethnic but that is just the beginning, every ministry has to find an entry point, although some may not have any intention of reaching out beyond their ethnic. It is not surprising because that is exactly what we see among those who held Peter's initial view that the Gospel was only for Jews – and we know how God changed the situation and Peter experienced real conversion in Acts 10!

The question is, how are our churches tapping into the migrant/refugee or foreign student resource? Are we simply dismissing them as immigrants who have come to take up our jobs and therefore should be sent back to their countries of origin? Are we simply dismissing them as mere ethnic churches that have little or no understanding of the cultures in which they are serving? Is our relationship with them end only at their use of our church buildings for their services, or are we seriously engaging them?

What about those in our congregations, do we simply look at them as passers-by, or do we make effort to integrate and encourage them participate in the life of the Church as full members with something to contribute? How much are taking seriously the importance of providing hospitality to immigrants, students and those working among us? How much are we open to the fact that these migrants have something important to offer and may hold the key to some of the challenges we face in matters of evangelism and church growth? How

can we make our congregations and churches more welcoming to those refugees, migrants and foreign students, in our midst in a way that goes beyond our perception of them as objects/subjects of our sympathy or/and ridicule? Can ECGI help to energise and encourage our churches by highlighting some good examples of where immigrants' ministries have made and continue to make contribution in evangelism and church growth work?

It will be important that the Anglican Communion learns from the Biblical, past and present experience in various contexts about the experience and ministry of "foreigners" in our midst! This call and plea goes to every context in our Communion – Asia (eg Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore), Africa (eg. South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, Ethiopia, Botswana, Kenya), Europe (e.g. UK), Australia, USA, Canada, etc. Some of the countries mentioned above provide good examples of ministry to/among and by migrants/refugees and students. There is a lot of resource out there for evangelism and church growth among the foreigners in our midst, and great evangelistic potential too for local churches!

History continues to challenge us with the reality that migrants have often been responsible for bringing renewal, vibrancy and growth in the life of the Church, and for starting new initiatives of church planting.

In a discussion on this presentation at the ECGI core group meeting the following points and questions emerged:

- Operation World says 250million people live outside the place of their birth;
- Migrants are a resource to our ministry as well as an opportunity for mission;
- The challenge is to accept the gift the migrant brings;
- In some countries, such as Melanesia, there are not many migrants but Chaplaincy work with seafarers is really important;
- There is the tension of migrant Christians not feeling welcome in host churches (but migrant congregations can be equally unwelcoming);
- Specifically some migrants are struggling with the liberal theology of many western churches, hence feeling the need to establish their own church community;
- Our Christian calling is to be a *foreigner* (pilgrims and strangers) within our own culture; those from other churches can assist us in this;
- Are we seeking assimilation or separate congregations?
- Increasing phenomena of multi-congregational belonging; belonging to both the host and language-based congregation;
- We must remember the role, and sacrificial life, of some who have deliberately chosen to become migrants as missionaries;
- There can be real problem of language learning in some countries, but when you are trying to express the deepest internal struggles you find the language in a new country;
- The Ethiopian official reads, but does not understand, the scriptures. Are those we minister to always able to understand?
- We often have a paradigm of *behave - believe – belong; perhaps we need a paradigm of belong – believe – behave;*
- Some migrants will have a *pre Enlightenment (pre- modernity)* worldview. They also bring an understanding of suffering that has been lost by host communities;
- Poorly paid migrant community might create churches that can't afford to pay their priest for first ten years, or so. It is easy to develop a dependence mentality;
- In North American some have the mentality of wanting to sue the diocese in response to insensitive cross cultural behaviour shown by migrant priests to the host community. In Canada they have need to consider what risks are worth taking;

- History shows us that migrants often are the church planters and evangelisers.
- We mustn't forget the value of converting those who return to their home country as Christians. Anecdotal examples were given of many who are still walking with the Lord and are now in key leadership positions in their home countries.
- The bible shows the benefits of being sent by Holy Spirit to *desert areas*; how faith grows when we are outside of our comfort zone;
- We should all be asking ourselves the following questions:
 - How are our churches tapping into migrants?
 - Are we integrating and offering hospitality?
 - Are we open to learning from them?
 - Can the Evangelism and Church Growth Initiative do anything to help with people explore their answers?