

Mobilization and Training for Church Planting in the Global Diaspora

By John Baxter



Farah was already on her journey to Christ when she came to London with a group of Egyptian female students to study nursing. When the rest of her classmates went to their religion's place of worship, she found herself wandering the streets of her London neighborhood wondering how to find out more about Jesus. It was on the university campus where a group of students from Nigeria found Farah and invited her to their fellowship. There the seed implanted in her heart grew to a full faith. She was cared for and discipled by her Nigerian friends. Soon she became a witness of Christ among her companions from Egypt and continues so today in her city on the Nile.

There is nothing unusual about this diaspora story. New immigrant churches spring up everywhere and lead people of many different cultural and religious origins to the Savior. What is unusual is for established mission-sending organizations to work effectively in starting and strengthening diaspora fellowships, such as the one that found Farah in London.

Most mission-sending organizations are not built well for diaspora missions. Our Western mission sending paradigm (and Majority World sending organizations constructed on this model) has been focused on sending trained, career, cross-cultural missionaries to the cultural homelands of the target people. Diaspora missions is a fairly new add-on to the prevailing model. Integration of diaspora missions into a sending agency's ministry focus involves a range of conceptual challenges. Becoming aware of these challenges is an important step for church planting effectiveness among the peoples of the global diaspora.

Conceptual Challenges

Conceptual challenges begin with seeing diaspora missions as a legitimate and potentially fruitful field of ministry. Next is a reorientation away from an exclusive focus on homelands to an inclusion of the

larger global presence of a given people group. This reorientation extends the call to church planting beyond the cultural homeland to wherever the specific people group resides. Instead of reaching Japan, the call is expanded to reaching the Japanese whether in Osaka or Oakland.

For many mission agencies a more adequate conceptualization includes an expansion of their basic understanding of diaspora missions. Too often diaspora missions only means evangelizing the unreached immigrant groups coming to Europe, the United States, and Canada. To use the Lausanne terminology¹ this is missions "to" the diaspora in which people groups without Christ move into contact with the church. Iranians finding Christ as they move into Germany is a current example.

While this an important aspect of diaspora missions, the majority of people on the move do not migrate into the Christian countries of the West. For instance, most of the population movements in Asia remains in that continent. A large percentage of people are moving to locations with little or no church presence, or if there is a local church it is often composed of other migrating people. A more adequate understanding of diaspora missions includes missions "through" and "beyond" the

diaspora. “Through” points to the phenomenon of Christians in the diaspora evangelizing their fellow countrymen also on the move. Nigerians evangelizing fellow Nigerians in London is an example.

Yet, if these same Nigerian Christians in London begin to evangelize other immigrant groups, such as Egyptians (or even the indigenous British), they have entered missions “beyond” the diaspora. Beyond in that their desire for mission reaches beyond their own migrating people group and towards other immigrants or the local population.

There is great potential for global church planting in all three of the diaspora mission categories—“to, through, and beyond.” But many mission sending organizations, especially Western agencies, have little direct involvement in the latter two types of diaspora outreach. The remainder of this discussion will focus on the missions through and beyond the diaspora.

Essentials for Church Planting Through and Beyond the Diaspora

Majority World Centered

The former missionary-receiving countries of the Majority World are now at the forefront of global mission advancement. Missions mobilization is increasingly Majority World centered. The great majority of those moving in the global diasporas, Christians and non-Christians, are also from the Global South and East. In comparison, of the approximately 250 million people living outside of the country of their birth, only five million are from the United States.

Missions through and beyond the diaspora are essentially mission movements of the Majority World church. This is a Majority World experience, and it is their story. Fruitfulness in diaspora church planting for sending organizations is contingent upon the ability to form genuine partnerships with the Majority World church, and to become servants and learners of those within the global diaspora. In diaspora missions it is no longer possible to simply talk about partnerships with the Majority World church.

This is especially true for Western mission organizations. The missions’ context of the migrating worker or the displaced person from the Majority World is largely closed off to the career Western missionary. Christian economic migrants have far greater access to the multitudes of the unreached who live and work in the same locations. They share a similar experience of migration and status in the new host country. Missions through

and beyond the diaspora occurs only in genuine partnership with the Majority World church.

Lay Empowered

This necessity, to be in genuine partnership with the Majority World church, is accentuated by another characteristic of diaspora missions—it is a lay movement. Most of the church planting efforts, through and beyond the diaspora, will be lay-driven. God in his sovereignty has allowed millions of Majority World lay people to move around the world, including into many of lands closed to career missionaries. Most of these lay Christians are economic workers. Yet, as they leave their home churches very few see themselves as missionaries. They are focused on providing for their family’s economic needs. The beginning of missions through and beyond the diaspora is a conceptual shift within these lay people from mere economic worker to divinely sent witness. Acquiring a missional intentionality is essential for lay-centered diaspora missions and church planting.

In contrast, the more traditional missions-sending model begins with the individual’s intention to be a witness and to plant churches. It is this intentionality, or calling, that leads to recruitment, training, and later deployment to the field. In diaspora missions the opposite is true. The vast majority of Christian migrant laborers have, in a sense, deployed to their mission field without the intention to be missional. They go looking for work and at present only a small percentage become intentional about missions.

The traditional mobilization model leads to the actual recruitment and deployment of only a small percentage from the possible pool of missionaries in the sending country. In the past, a call to missions included a high level of commitment to pursue the lifestyle and training needed for missions, and to the process of raising financial support. The typical model for tent-making missions or business as mission begins with a high level of intentionality and a similar commitment for training.

The reverse is true for diaspora missions in which there are large numbers of lay persons deploying to other countries, but with little intentionality to be witnesses for Christ, or to pursue the training needed to be effective church planters. However, if only a small percentage, say ten to twenty percent, of these diaspora believers were mobilized and trained, the result would be the release into the harvest of hundreds of thousands of intentional witnesses.

It has been said that one way to envision the completion of the Great Commission is the idea that

every person on earth would have a relationship with at least one genuine Christian. That dream cannot be realized through the deployment of traditional missionaries. They are not enough and they are not allowed into the places that need them most. But the migration of millions of believers as economic workers into all the lands of 10/40 Window moves us substantially in the right direction. But only if they become intentional and trained for a holy life and for witness.

If mission-sending organizations are to work among the Christians of the global diaspora for effective church planting they must change how they mobilize and train. At present most of the mission resources do not connect well with the diaspora. Mobilization programs and training content is usually geared for the career pastor or missionary, and the venues for training are not accessible to average lay diaspora laborer. Like two ships passing in the night, the vast resources of the traditional mission organizations and the believers of the Majority World diaspora rarely come into contact.

The Context of Weakness

Another important characteristic of diaspora missions is the context of weakness. Most of the Christians moving around the world are either displaced persons or have entered the global work force because of deep economic need. Almost all of them experience a deep sense of dislocation and loneliness, separated from family and culture. In addition to these hardships they face forms of oppression and abuse in the new and alien societies in which they find themselves at the bottom of the social pecking order.

Emotional, spiritual, and family health all suffer in this context. The mobilization of the Christian diaspora for witness and effective church planting cannot be separated from the need for wholistic care.

In contrast (Table 9.1), Western mission societies typically send out relatively healthy missionaries. Our missions model is predicated on working with those who have been screened and empowered for emotional, family, and spiritual health. Effective church planting within the global diaspora requires investment in personal and family health as the foundation for witness and ministry. Few mission sending organizations are presently structured to deliver this type of care.

The Place for Mobilization, Training, and Care: The Two Churches

Perhaps it is the location for mobilization, training, and care that is the most important conceptual shift required for fruitful diaspora missions. While diaspora missions are lay-driven, it must also be church-driven at the same time. The proper venue for mobilization, training, and wholistic care are the two churches of the diaspora.

First is the home or sending church. In the case where a believer is leaving his homeland to find work abroad, his home church is the best venue to prepare the worker and his/her family for life and witness in the diaspora. A pre-deployment ministry of the home church can help instill a sense of intentionality or calling for mission. Potential family and financial problems can be addressed. Training for basic discipleship and witness can be accomplished. Ongoing systems for contact and accountability can be created in advance, and contact with a fellowship in the new work location can be established.

The second church is the fellowship in the new host country. Whether a formal or simple church structure, the help, encouragement, and accountability provided by the new host fellowship is essential for continuing health and witness. In many places the leaders of diaspora fellowships are themselves untrained economic migrants, many times young in the faith. Help and resources are needed at every level for these fellowships, attender and leader alike.

Only healthy diaspora fellowships become the healthy base for further church planting among unreached immigrant groups or among the host population. God's mission is accomplished as he inwardly transforms men and women for ministry and leadership. Spontaneous church planting in the global diaspora requires transformational leaders and transformational leaders grow best in healthy churches.

Concluding Thoughts

Conceptual shifts are not easy. The author's own sending agency has for years sent Anglo-American missionaries to France to plant churches among the indigenous French and North African Muslim immigrants. Only recently has the agency deployed Muslim background believers from North Africa as part of the mission team in France. Even though the agency has worked for many years among the Francophone churches of Western Africa, there has been little thought of working with these churches to mobilize and train their members who are now living in France. Sunday mornings the trains in Paris

are full of African believers going to their diaspora churches. To what extent can these Ivorian and Cameroon believers reach beyond their own African diaspora to help evangelize and plant churches among the unreached?

The intention to partner with the Majority World church and its lay diaspora is at the heart of reconceptualization of the mission task. To find a willingness and ability to prioritize the two Majority World churches, home and host, for the care and training of their members is essential to the task of healthy church multiplication among the unreached people groups of the global diaspora.

Further Help for Mission Organizations

The insights presented in this article have been gleaned from the research conducted by NextMove Diaspora Ministry, a research and consulting ministry for mission agencies involved in diaspora missions. NextMove is a ministry of Frontier Ventures and a partner with the Lausanne Global Diaspora Network. For more details on resources and help for mission agencies and mission sending church networks see the NextMove website at NextMove.net.

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Notes

1. Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization. (2010). *Scattered to Gather: Embracing the Global*