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One of the deepest tensions felt by the human race is the urge to move and the urge to stay, the desire to sink deep roots and the desire to search for greener pastures. This age-old tension is acknowledged in the earliest pages of Scripture as God commanded humanity to “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” and then “took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it” (Gen 1:28; 2:15). Stealing from Hamlet: to go or not to go, that is the question.

The movement of people in the Bible is evident in many places and for many reasons. People are commanded to move to fulfill their creational purpose, to go to a new place where they can be a blessing, to return to their ancestral land, and to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. They are forced to move due to personal sin, famine, war, and political conflict. The ebb and flow of people is chronicled by biblical authors who describe them in ways that help us think rightly about people in motion even today.

One basic biblical word for people on the move is the Hebrew ḥēr—people who lived with others but were not family or who were temporarily living in a town or area.1 Today we might call them nomads, sojourners, resident aliens, or even illegal aliens. International students and businessmen, transient laborers, and even cross-cultural missionaries fit this description. Since the Patriarchs were the archtypical ḥērûm, the Mosaic law required that Israelites protect sojourners along with orphans and widows as the most vulnerable in society and most likely to be abused. Theologically, the early church recognized that those who are in Christ “are no longer strangers and aliens, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph 2:19), even so, sociologically, many people today—whether Christian or not—live as sojourners.

Another important word is diaspora, a term used in the Bible to refer to the Jews who were dispersed among the Gentiles.2 That was its use in the three New Testament texts and twelve Septuagint passages where it appears.3 It was only later that the word, by extension, was applied to people from other ethnic or religious groups who lived in a land not their own. Strictly speaking, these are the groups that have settled outside of their traditional homeland. And as members of the Jewish diaspora were known to return “home” on occasion before returning to their diasporic communities (see Acts 2:9–11), today many members of diaspora groups frequently return “home” to visit family and friends.

Sojourners, strangers, diaspora, aliens. These are all names given to people who are considered or consider themselves to be “other”. It is these people who are the focus of this issue of Mission Round Table.

The opening article informs us that “Missional Migration” matters to people on the move, to God, and to everyone who desires to see the church grow among people living in unexpected places. Significantly, moving gives some people an opportunity to encounter Christ for the first time and others an opportunity to take Christ to new locations.

In “Hopes, Dreams, and Dangers,” Richard Evans draws on his experience working with Nepali immigrants in the UK to present the need to build bridges between local churches and members of diasporic communities and for different generations of the newcomers to work together as they relate to both the majority culture and their traditional community.

Building on some biblical examples of migration, Terry McGrath and Victoria Sibley-Bentley, in “Mission to, through, and from Diaspora,” pass on insights gained from years of ministry to international students and conclude that we need to be aware that the movements of people bring opportunities for the gospel to flow in multiple directions.

Anyone who has lived overseas knows that it is difficult to fit back into one’s home country due to new cultural outlooks and subtle changes in their home culture during their absence. This is particularly true for people who first encountered Christianity while away. Several articles give varying perspectives of this reality. Focusing on partnerships between host churches, ethnic churches, and parachurch organizations, Carolyn Kemp encourages us to engage in “Multi-dimensional Discipling for Diaspora Communities.” As she argues, people who encounter Christianity and begin to grow in faith on foreign soil need to be deeply and broadly discipled to reduce the possibility of dropout.

Reducing defection is also addressed in Stuart Bullington’s plea for “Contextualised Discipleship among East Asians in the Diaspora” in relation to issues like re-entry shock, family demands, work pressure, and differences in church life. Challenges to adjustment in these areas are also illustrated in the next article: “Going Home is Not What I Thought it would be.” Both articles provide practical suggestions on how to help prepare returnees for the transition before they return.

Responding to the same challenges from the perspective of Japanese returnees, Graham Orr shows how “Japanese Cultural Dynamics” impact their time abroad and their return.
Missional Migration

Lightyear

Lightyear is a social researcher working in Southeast Asia, training governments in good practice and churches in cross-cultural mission.

Migration: a growing trend, an ancient reality

The massive migration of people...becomes a threefold challenge to Christian churches. It is a challenge to Christian compassion, to an educational task inside churches, and to a prophetic ministry to society at large. It also becomes a missiological challenge as migrants are open to new commitments of faith.1

Migration is, and perhaps has always been, one of the most significant issues in Christian mission.2 Not only are migration levels at an all-time high in human history3 but the causes, patterns, and consequences of migration are also undergoing constant change.4 Much current discussion is around the “immigration” aspects of migration,5 with church leaders often at the forefront of protests against racially determined anti-immigration politics.6 However, a focus either on the “migration crisis in Europe” and church responses to the influx of refugees7 or on “diaspora communities,”8 obscures both the wider dynamics of the causes, effects, and nature of twenty-first century migration which is characterized by increasingly precarious existences, and the plurality of the migration experience, which in turn can potentially yield a much richer missiology.

Migration is viewed as one of the most significant socio-political issues of the day by most countries in East Asia,12 whether it be relating to large numbers of guest workers in countries such as Singapore,13 remittance economies in migrant-sending countries such as the Philippines,14 massive rural-urban migration in China,15 or generational depletion in rural areas of Myanmar.16 Again, binary analyses of whether migration is positive or negative miss the point: inevitably there are “winners” (a certain cadre of migrants and the businesses who benefit from cheap and flexible labour) as well as “losers” (workers who undertake significant risk, often accrue debt, and live in precarious conditions). But beyond this, there frequently exists a set of “trade-offs” in which monetary gain (higher wages) may be offset by social loss (separation from family, mental illness, and dislocation). The point is, migration is happening on a huge scale, with multiple and massive impacts on communities within East Asia. Like the tide, it is moving, drawing with it an array of people and groups.

Recent nationalistic political movements in Western Europe and the United States have been fueled by anti-immigration rhetoric. The subsequent debates on immigration tend to narrow the discourse to problematic arrivals rather than the wider conditions which are resulting in ever-increasing numbers of people moving from their places of origin. The issue of agency is also complex: reducing migration debates to “economic” or “political” or “forced” or “voluntary” reasons obscures or elides the interplay of multiple factors which exert “pushes” and “pulls” and which result in migration. For many, the “choice” to migrate is seldom more than Hobson’s: remain, where there are no jobs, where crops fail, and where dependents need feeding; or leave, with the risks and dislocations which inevitably occur.

Diaspora, refugees, migrants, and sojourners: When words matter

The term “diaspora” has also been used to describe migrants. But whilst the original use of the term broadly encapsulated migration and colonization,17 literature has also...
identified multiple applications of the term, recognizing the different forms of transnational communities. Whilst diaspora communities may emerge from migration, not all migrants can be considered diaspora. Moreover, whereas migration describes the process and politics of people movement, diaspora is a term better used to describe the identity politics of those who have moved—and even there, not all migrants are diaspora. Here, I will use the term migration, as opposed to diaspora, for three reasons. Firstly, by considering migration we are able to take into account the social dynamics and politics of leaving, arriving, staying, and returning, whilst simultaneously considering the implications of these for those who did not migrate. The reality that some are left behind is critical in our consideration of missional migration. Secondly, the current trends in migration tend towards less “rooted” identities in the host country. This means that a large number of migrants do not develop any sense of diaspora identity. (Think of Myanmar migrant workers on fishing boats.) Finally, by considering migration, we are also able to dialogue with the issue using the terms in which it is being discussed in the world in which migrants themselves live and breathe, a world characterized by uncertainty, precarity, and increasingly narrow choices.

Taking a wider “transnational perspective” enables us to see international migrants not as anomalies, but rather as representatives of an increasingly globalized world who have found it possible to have multiple localities and identities…who are anchored neither in their place of origin nor their place of destination.

God on the move

Migration has, and continues to be, a major phenomenon in the lives of God’s people. In Migration Through the Eyes of Faith, Robert Heimburger describes “a Christian account of migration [arising] from a reading of Deuteronomy 10, circling around a God who migrates with God’s people, a God who loves them and calls them to love migrants.”

Taking the broad view of migration as including different degrees of voluntary agency, biblical examples abound. Abraham’s migration took place in response to God’s command (Gen 12:1–5), food insecurity (Gen 12:5), and conflict due to resource scarcity (Gen 13:7–18). Migration to Egypt (Genesis 46) and the great exodus from Egypt (Exod 13) presaged a prolonged period of statelessness before the Israelites entered the promised land. Exile (2 Chr 36, Dan 1:1–6) and return (Neh 2:11) nonetheless resulted in a significant dispersion (John 7:35), and the identity of God’s people became enshrined in liturgical language: “You shall say, My Father was a wandering Aramean” (Deut 26:5). “Dispersion,” described in the Hebrew Scriptures by seven different root words which encompass exile, winnowing, banishment, scattering, dispersing, scattering abroad, and separating and in the New Testament by two Greek words (diaspora and diaspeiro), describes a chequered history of voluntary and involuntary movement which had, by the time of the early church, resulted in a global Jewish diaspora. Viewed through the longer lens of Christian history, the dispersion is seen as a preparation for the gospel age, and fulfilment of Israel’s calling to be a light to the nations. As Enoch Wan says, “God used the Jewish dispersion to draw forth the understanding of God’s sovereign hand in the scattering and regathering of His people, in using them to be a witness to the nations…and in preparing the way for the coming of Christ.”

The early church was itself dispersed through persecution and command (Acts) and the subsequent spread of the early Christian faith is largely characterized as much by the missional activities of migrants and displaced persons, as by organized, intentional mission. In East Asia, for example, John England describes the entry of Christianity into Burma (now Myanmar) at least as early as the ninth and tenth centuries through Indian Christians who settled in Thaton, but were later captured by the Burmese king and put to work in temple construction, where they rather imaginatively left their mark through Christian-influenced frescos on the temple walls.

Migration has played a significant factor in the growth and global spread of religion, including the early and more recent spread of Islam and different forms of Christianity. In

By considering migration we are able to take into account the social dynamics and politics of leaving, arriving, staying, and returning, whilst simultaneously considering the implications of these for those who did not migrate. The reality that some are left behind is critical in our consideration of missional migration.
recent times this has notably impacted the global spread of Pentecostalism.67 Potentially, there are three “arcs” of mission with regard to migration: firstly, where migrants take their religion with them and establish “diaspora” faith communities;69 secondly, where outreach to migrants in their host countries is undertaken (perhaps the more traditional “diaspora ministries”);70 and thirdly, where returning migrants bring back a newfound, or renewed faith to their homeland. We can perhaps add to this two more “arcs”: firstly, the effect on communities of origin of mass out-migrations of younger, working aged people who would be the potential religious and community leaders of the next generation,71 and secondly, the growing phenomenon of more intentional missonal migration to traditional mission-sending countries.72

**Arcs of missonal migration: Why it matters**

Migration, therefore, matters missionally, firstly because it matters to the people where we live and work and minister. The context of migration itself—be it forced migration resulting in refugees, or economic migrants seeking some kind of security in the growing precarity of much of the world—shapes the identities of migrants and their families. This, perhaps more than anything, mitigates against overly simplistic categorizations of diaspora, which may elide huge differences between people of the same ethnicity but vastly different experiences.

Moreover, many of the communities where we work may themselves be affected by either in or out-migration—resulting in social and economic dynamics which may significantly affect the way we approach mission and ministry. Beyond this are the “justice” elements of a missonal consciousness. This perhaps alludes to the “prophetic” element of the challenges of migration described by Samuel Escobar, who believes that following the God we do inevitably draws us to question the structures and processes which lead to so much migration. Not only conflicts, but the more insidious cycle of how huge inequalities fuel rampant consumption, making ever-unsustainable demands on natural resources, which tend to be drawn from places inhabited by people with limited rights. Then the land becomes parched, and crops fail, and people move, and conflicts arise when resources are scarce. These may well describe countries in which we live and work.

Secondly, as a result of migration, the “maps” are being turned upside down. Not only are the people we want to reach often present where we least expect them to, they may be, increasingly absent where we most expect them to be. Declining rural congregations often make church multiplication a challenge in rural areas, especially where some communities are left with few working aged adults. Rural churches which once could support pastors may now be struggling. Urban churches also face the challenge of reaching out to large numbers of migrants from rural areas. Most happily accept fellow believers (and their donations) but are less enthused with re-orientating well-established practices to make them more accessible to the newly arrived migrants living in precarious conditions in peri-urban slums and whose normal schedule does not allow for a pause between 10:30 and 12:00 on a Sunday morning. Missionally, then, this raises challenges in countries where large numbers of unreached people live in rural areas, but where declining rural populations make church planting less sustainable. At the same time, the very thing which brings on rural decline also results in urban growth, presenting an opportunity as well as a challenge.

Thirdly, dislocated persons and populations, away from the comforts and constraints of their communities of origin, frequently are more open to experimentation and alternative lifestyles and customs. This may lead to positive or negative results, such as alcohol and substance abuse or, on the other hand, increased or changed religious commitment which is significantly influenced by the degree of commitment to the new location. A longing for community, belonging, and safe spaces drive many to seek fellowship in communities not of their religion of origin, and this challenges churches in migrant receiving areas to be alert to the need for flexible and holistic approaches to mission in these contexts. Some Christian migrants who grew up in nominal homes find their faith regenerated by overseas congregations, perhaps because they are now unfettered by the pressures to conform in the home country.

Fourthly, and following the third arc, migration matters missionally because migrants, in addition to sending remittances home, also act as conduits for new things, through the process of “social remittances.”73 This enables the transmission of the gospel, through living vessels, back into those very rural areas where traditional mission has possibly founedered or become unsustainable. The departed one finds the gift, and, returning, brings it to his own household. Had the same gift been proffered by the hand of a stranger it might well have been rejected. Sadly though, the opposite may also occur as some are drawn into false teaching and others into destructive lifestyles, so that they bring back habits and potentially communicable diseases which wreak havoc on the families at home.

Finally, and drawing again on the work of Kim,74 Chen,75 and others, is the growing realization of the shifting centre of gravity of the church, as churches from the global South increasingly not only outnumber those of the North, but send missionaries and migrants alike, bringing renewal and challenge to churches in the North. The renewal is often a welcome influx of youthful, faithful congregants. The challenge is that these congregants are different, a situation that raises issues of integration and accommodation. Our thinking and practice are challenged by Passarelli who writes, “But despite the well-rooted Christian tradition of welcoming strangers a question remains: what happens when the strangers are here to stay? How to deal with someone who is different but is not an enemy?”76

**What happens when migration is missiona**l?

Returning to Samuel Escobar’s statement at the beginning of this paper, we need to see that the challenge is social (one of compassion), educational, prophetic, and missiona. I would like to draw on the final two of these four, outlining how mission can adapt to the reality of a world increasingly shaped by migration, in faithful discipleship to a migrant God. Here I draw on Wan and add a few additional observations.77

1. The church should actively engage to impart a missonal sense to believers on the move. This intentional equipping of those who are already migrating—particularly
those migrating to places where gospel witness is limited—is a critical response which begins to shift the “economy” of migration. As we have said before, Christian migrants—particularly economic migrants—often retain ties with and send remittances to the home country. By framing and actualizing their migration as more than an act of survival or economic strategy, but as a part of God’s mission, the “rewards” of migration are wider and deeper. This shift towards migrants as “Kingdom workers”—such as Filipino migrants in the Middle East—is in many ways not new, but becomes rather an iteration of an older trend reaching back to the early church. Does this call for, then, special attention to programmes which prepare would-be migrants, and networks which enable them to be connected to missional churches in their place of arrival? I believe it does.

2. The church should equip and mobilize Christian migrants in their host country and nurture the spiritual growth of migrants for outreach in host countries and their countries of origin. This means mission by, and through the “diaspora” and others who are transnational in their identity. By linking with the first action, those who do migrate, and do so missionally, can be incorporated into missional congregations, where the arc can potentially be completed by those migrants who reach back into their own countries, to other migrants, or, as is often seen, successfully cross cultural and ethnic boundaries in their host country.

3. The church should partner with related organisations in building networks to reach migrants. Whilst there are many potential iterations of this, one particular example is the growing need of urban churches to re-orientate towards the phenomenon of rural-urban migration. In China and also in much of Southeast Asia traditionally rural economies are rapidly being transformed, and much church growth takes place in the margins and shadows of large cities. Potentially, newer and less structured denominations can respond more effectively, but the challenges are many when integrating rural emigres into urban life, let alone into the church. Thus, a missional focus is needed, aimed at equipping urban churches to be keenly aware and able to adapt to the needs and challenges of migrants on their doorsteps—potentially in large numbers. This may require changes to church practice, potentially to embrace more relational and network-based models of congregational life—and this applies not only to “western” churches but also to many denominational expressions on other parts of the globe. This also calls for a holistic approach to urban mission, so that the need for community and belonging, and practical needs of navigating urban landscapes and bureaucracy—frequently a major part of migrant life—can be better addressed.

4. The church should provide pastoral care for family members who remain behind.

5. The church should be ever aware and prepared to speak and act prophetically where policies and practices, particularly of the church itself, contribute to the conditions of inequality and oppression which trigger migration, or which constrain proper Christian compassion on the “stranger”. This is particularly challenging in the current era, when the consequences of political and economic policies are denied and we refuse to care for those who may have been displaced due to our actions. The current politics of demonizing the immigrant, on the one hand, and of holding up that demonization as an unacceptable challenge to the liberal consensus, on the other, tend to deny any space for the migrants to speak for themselves or for any other voices to be heard, for that matter. By understanding migration and immigration missionally, we also avoid three pitfalls. Firstly, by recognizing the hand of God in history, which shows that the church frequently grew and spread through migrants, we can be more open to what God is doing through migration, rather than, on the one hand, bemoaning the decline of our rural congregations, or, on the other hand, becoming uneasy as our own “type” becomes a smaller minority. The possibilities for new iterations of church and mission engendered by multi-cultural encounters and expressions of church enable us to engage a different horizon.

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as usual.14 The notion of going to “where the people are” brings, as we have noted earlier, an awareness of unexpected absences and presences, and unexpected opportunities. This perhaps entails “moving with the movers” and shifting our own mission focus and methods to strategic approaches which are moving with the tide of migration.

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26 Wan, Diaspora Missiology, 32.


30 Here an “arc” refers to the way that a ‘story or movement’ can or will unfold. It shows the direction and trajectory of something.


41 Wan, Diaspora Missiology, 314–321.

42 Wan, Diaspora Missiology, 373–379.

43 Wan, Diaspora Missiology, 314–321.


45 Melba Paillia Maggery, Transforming Society: Reflections on the Kingdom and Politics (Quezon City, Philippines: Institute for Studies in Asian Church and Culture, 1996), 98.

Hopes, Dreams, and Dangers: Nepali Young People and the Next Generations of the Church in the UK

Richard Evans

As the West brought its love for God to us in Nepal, so now we are bringing our love for God back to the West,” Sornim shared with me during a recent conversation.

The son of a retired Ghurkha soldier—whose father Simon Sunwar came to Christ in 1997 and whose family migrated to London from Hong Kong in 2007—Sornim represents a young generation of Nepali Christians born in Nepal (or intermediate country) but brought up and educated in the UK. This so-called “one-and-a-half generation” is now actively working together with its seniors, the “first” generation, to plot both the present and future of their Nepali diaspora church, the “second” generation, in the face of significant challenges and opportunities (Diagram 1).

The United Nepali Revival Church (UNRC) in Wembley, of which Simon is the Pastor and which this London-born, “English Christian” has had the privilege of calling his spiritual home for the past four years, has doubled in size to sixty members over that period. The successive spikes in Nepali migration to the UK following the negotiation of more favourable immigration settlements for former Ghurkha soldiers in 2004 and 2009, have occasioned the entry of a significant minority of Nepali Christians.

In many places, including London, these families found themselves in areas lacking organised Nepali fellowships—a void that precipitated a ten-year journey of struggle, consolidation, stability, and growth from which the UNRC, along with other “survivors”, has now emerged.

What follows is a brief presentation of preliminary findings from interviews conducted with members of the UNRC and others from within the wider Nepali Christian community in the UK. During these conversations possible future scenarios for the Church were shared alongside an immensely rich mixture of Christian life stories and associated global journeys.

This summary of their valuable contributions is intended to stimulate forward thinking vis-à-vis inter-generational, inter-church, and inter-cultural relationships, and in some small way address the current dearth of case-studies on Nepalese migrations. It also follows in the footsteps of several

Diagram 1: The Generations

[Diagram showing the generations of the church]
studies relating to “one-and-a-half generation” Christians in the Korean and Chinese diasporas. However, whereas these largely focus on issues of definition, identity, and education, this article will focus on their unique missional potential as cross-cultural “bridge builders”.

1. The generations

“And He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers” (Mal 4:6).

Nepali Saying: “स्वर्गको चाबी छोरोको हातमा हुनछ” “The key to heaven’s door is in the son’s hand.” Shared by Kalyan Gurung, from the “one-and-a-half generation”.

The church is no stranger to the problems posed by generation gaps that are perceived as “unbridgeable” (Eph 3:4; 6:1–3). The idea that such generational differences can be exacerbated in the early stages of a transnational migration has been attested to by commentators familiar with the Nepali Christian diaspora in the UK. For example, Valerie Inchley succinctly outlines the issue of the younger members of the family: they adapt to the language and culture of the host nation with greater ease than their parents and grandparents, which leads to conflicting preferences with regard to how worship services are conducted. One young adult lamented that some Nepali teenagers “only come to church because of their parents” and then periodically disengage from their interaction with personal electronic devices to participate in the service.

1.1 Recognising an educational irony

These negative attitudes towards church were often traced by parents back to their children’s participation in the UK education system. Many families noted that a “proper education” had been a significant pull-factor in their decision to relocate to England—with the young people themselves often lobbying for this option to be made available to them when their parents were reticent to move. Ironically, however, this academic pursuit was then seen to undermine the more conservative principles of the older generation in the home, causing their attempts to advise and correct their children “in the Christian way” to be ineffective. Receiving “a good education” at school was observed to stifle efforts to impart “a gospel education” at home. Differing generational experiences of cross-cultural interaction in the UK (and responses to this) appear to have reinforced or even accentuated the prevailing values of the older generations whilst shaping the values of the younger generations in a way that has contributed to greater intergenerational tension.

In the midst of these strains, however, attention is turning to the members of the “one-and-a-half generation” and their growing role as cross-cultural bridges between the generations. The “first generation” seniors are increasingly recognising the needs of the younger generation but also that they face difficulties in addressing them directly. “They simply won’t listen to us” was a frequent refrain of parents; the younger “second” generation’s perception of an educational deficit within the senior “first” generation rendering their counsel “old-fashioned and out-dated.” Conversely, those in the “one-and-a-half generation” evidently considered themselves able to understand the views and values of both groups and uniquely-positioned to arbitrate between them (see Diagram 1). They were also found to be acutely aware of the need to demonstrate both empathy and humility if their participation in this process was to be effective.
1.2 Embracing new ministry opportunities

Both the “first” and the “one-and-a-half” generations were pleased to report that these “negotiations” had resulted in the formation of two new groups within the UNRC community: a “Youth Fellowship,” formally established in 2015 for those between the ages of 19 and 35 and a “Teen Fellowship” in early 2017 for 12–18 year olds. The first is representative of the “one-and-a-half generation,” the latter of the “second.” In both cases the “one-and-a-half generation” actively sought the permission, oversight, and blessing of the “first” generation before launching these ministries. In this way the key Nepali value of “respect”, as emphasised in several of the interviews, was embodied and expressed.

It is important to recognise that the “one-and-a-half generation” first negotiated and established a mechanism to meet their own need for discipleship that subsequently fostered a concern to meet the discipleship needs of the “second.” Simonth Rai, an accounting student and the newly appointed leader of the “Teen Fellowship,” testified to the importance of the ministry she had received as part of the “Youth Fellowship” in opening her eyes to the spiritual needs of the “next generation” and nurturing a desire to serve them. She pointed out that one of the first challenges has been to help the teenagers develop a Christian apologetic that will enable them to participate more effectively in discussions with those in school who represented and advocated for other religions, particularly Islam. Indeed, this concern had been one of the driving forces for establishing the group and the catalyst for the discussions that followed.

1.3 Towards inter-generational harmony

This inter-generational process of inaugurating new ministries observed the traditional Nepali values inherent within a societal hierarchy based on age and ensured that the spiritual needs of all generations were addressed. As one might expect, all parties tacitly acknowledged minor difficulties and misunderstandings “on the way” and the need to demonstrate ongoing flexibility and trust. The success of the “Teen Fellowship” in particular is by no means assured although the early signs are promising. There is a fear for some, particularly those progressing to higher levels of education, that a “window of opportunity” may have passed; but also a hope, especially for the younger teenagers, that they will eventually contribute to the future development and leadership of the church.

To explore these futures, however, it is important to understand the church’s origins—a subject to which we will now turn.

2. The futures

“At first a little church in a barn, then a barn in the forest.”


The church in the global north has often been cool in its embrace of those from the global south. In terms of receiving South Asian Christians, P. Emil Chandran regretfully noted that “in general the churches’ response… in host nations [he specifically mentions the UK amongst others] has been poor.” Moving closer to “home,” Peter Brierley goes further to enquire if “there is a place for those of other cultures in our traditional London or UK churches as they are” or if radical change is required to “transform a middle-class, white stereotype into a warm, all-embracing New Testament fellowship?”

Thankfully, when Sornim’s father Simon first arrived in the UK, he did receive a warm welcome from the local Methodist Church in which the UNRC is now meeting. He explained that he had no intention at that time of forming a separate Nepali Church (Diagram 2, Model A). However, the “growing demand” from other arrivals upon those, like Simon, who had already been instrumental in forming and leading the United Nepali Christian Church in Hong Kong eventually, yet reluctantly, caused them to “upgrade” their mid-weekly Nepali house fellowship into a fully-fledged Nepali church on 1 August 2010. Initially, they met together on a Saturday, as per Nepali church custom, before moving the service to Sunday afternoons in order to coincide with members’ employment patterns.

2.1 Building the case for a ‘Nepali’ church

Several individuals observed that various social, cultural, and linguistic needs were met through their participation in an exclusively Nepali congregation. Members knew that if they or their loved ones passed away that their family would be appropriately supported—a vital reassurance. Other Nepali Christians, who had initially ventured into UK congregations, eventually returned to a Nepali church. This was often due to the more intentional manner of pastoral care they received from their “own” pastors. Attending a Nepali church in the UK was thereby seen as a way to resolve a variety of cross-cultural complications and enable a clear Nepali identity to be established.

But how does a Nepali church sustain its Nepali identity from generation to generation?

Panu Lama, from the younger end of the “first” generation, outlined a possible strategy. Drawing on Mark 18:20, he asserted that “Church is like oxygen for us [Nepalis],” advocating a triple-track approach designed to maintain a distinctively Nepali church. Firstly, the Nepali community urgently needed to be more intentional about
transmitting the Nepali vernacular to the second and third generations through extra-curricular classes and home conversation. Secondly, parents should be held responsible for imparting both their Christian faith and traditional Nepali values to their children. Finally, the UNRC must purchase its own building in order to establish a Nepali Christian Centre that could provide a more “flexible and accessible” social space in which the young people could gather and fellowship. Within this scenario (Diagram 2, Model B), cross-cultural mission would mean incorporating non-Nepali converts to Christianity from the surrounding community into the congregation through voluntary, assisted Nepali language acquisition.

2.2 The dilemma of investing in people or place

Representatives from all generations reflected similar sentiments concerning the objectives of instilling the Nepali language and values (thus establishing this scenario as a widely held future ideal). Several also acknowledged that such a strategy was likely to encounter ongoing, even terminal, resistance from the “second” generation. Furthermore, though procuring property as a means of securing a physical, social, and spiritual future for the church was prevalent amongst the “first generation,” members of the “one-and-a-half generation” preferred to invest in people before property.

Due to resource limitations, what was perceived by church members as a binary choice—people or property—also appeared to be rooted in differing generational values. Given their extensive church experience but lack of formal ministry training, the “first generation” tended to emphasise their proven proficiency in matters of church management, planning, and growth. By way of contrast, the “one-and-a-half generation” tended to value “expertise” over “experience,” especially that which could be acquired through the means of which the “first generation” had been largely deprived. What had worked so effectively for them in Hong Kong and other cross-cultural situations could also work in London. By way of contrast, the “one-and-a-half generation” tended to value “expertise” over “experience,” especially that which could be acquired through the means of which the “first generation” had been largely deprived. They were keen to see the “first generation” invest directly in their generation in order to “serve” all generations, as opposed to the “first generation” investing indirectly into both generations through the provision of facilities.

It is important to acknowledge the honourable intentions reflected in both approaches and each generation’s sincere concern regarding the future of their church. However, from a strategic perspective, the potential outcomes are quite different. On the one hand, the “property acquisition” route, reflecting a strong and valid desire for cultural and linguistic longevity alongside ongoing Christian witness, culminated in the prospective development of a dedicated Nepali Christian centre. On the other hand, the “people investment” route, depending on the nature of the training undertaken, was seen to open up more diverse possibilities.

2.3 Training cross-cultural “bridge builders”

“We could prepare Nepali Pastors to help us...to understand British culture...to integrate more easily and witness [to non-Nepalis],” one member suggested. Implicit in this aspiration was the prospect of a more hybrid church identity emerging as a result of pastors engaging in appropriately contextualised, cross-culturally orientated, “Diasporic Pastoral Training”. Such a programme could be designed to equip would-be Pastors from diaspora churches in the UK to deal with the specific challenges and opportunities that they encounter. In this scenario (Diagram 2, Model C) questions regarding language, values, and church conduct are regarded as negotiable, dependent primarily on changing generational needs and the fruit of any cross-cultural outreach undertaken. The “one-and-a-half generation,” as well as being an internal “bridge” between generations, could also function as an external “bridge” between peoples.

Commensurate with this expanded intermediary role—from generations to peoples—discussions with the “one-and-a-half generation” often progressed towards the adoption of a more conciliatory “best-of-both-worlds” position. Couldn’t the most desirable values of the Nepali and British cultures be blended, embodied, and expressed in the life of the church? This prospect might be considered idealistic, especially given the complexity inherent in diasporic, cross-cultural value formation. Nonetheless, each generation’s oft-expressed concern for the overarching biblical value of congregational “unity” should enable the UNRC to reach an inter-generational and inter-cultural consensus around the values of “experience” and “expertise”. This would allow the whole church family to explore together a wider range of potential church futures.

3. The relationships

Nepali Saying: “अनुभूको नठोसी, आगो बढैरै” “Unless a piece of burning firewood is placed in the fire, its flame goes out.” Shared by Sit Rai.

“A friend loves at all times and a brother is born for adversity” (Prov 17:17).

“Our discussions have revolved around mobilising the uniquely positioned “one-and-a-half generation” to tackle the pressing inter-generational and cross-cultural issues inherent in diaspora church life and ministry. However, in order to understand the widespread nature of these challenges and the mutual support available to meet them, it is important to appreciate the wide-range of embedded and inter-linked networks to which the UNRC is connected (Diagram 3)."
There is a need to build two-way “bridges.” As the diasporic “one-and-a-half generation” is well placed to “bridge” between “generations” and “peoples,” the diaspora churches can provide an essential “bridge” between the local churches and migrant communities. At the same time, the local churches can provide a “bridge” between diaspora churches and the host culture, not just to serve the former’s “second generation” but for the mutual benefit of all.

In this concluding section, two such groups will be considered: The “London Regional Association of Nepali Churches” and the “Local UK Churches.”

3.1 London Regional Association of Nepali Churches

Diaspora communities often contain relatively small numbers of people, putting pressure on resources and leadership as churches expand. As a result, they frequently put a special premium on unity. For the UNRC, whilst “ongoing relationships with [a] homeland” community are often regarded as definitive when describing a diaspora group, the relationships formed with the Nepali churches in Hong Kong and the UK currently appear to be of the greatest importance.

Regrettably, Pastor Simon had endured two painful church splits as the Nepali Christian community was establishing itself in Hong Kong. As a result, he and his colleagues have been keen to promote a Nepali ecumenism that would preclude such outcomes and ensure the growing stability of the Nepali church in the UK. They see that a divided diaspora church compromises its ability to face an already uncertain future in an unfamiliar context, thus potentially damaging all. Conversely, a united church can provide a stable and cooperative ecclesiastical environment in which these uncertainties can be faced together. The pastors in particular appear to draw considerable strength from the ecumenical arrangements that have developed as a result.

The progressive coming together of several independent Nepali churches to form the now five-member “London Regional Association of Nepali” is testimony to this “spirit of unity” and evidence of a widening appreciation of its potential advantages. For the “first generation,” participation in the group was perceived to diminish potential issues of competition, suspicion, and “sheep-stealing” whilst providing a forum in which matters of doctrinal orthodoxy, or otherwise, could be discussed and addressed. Whilst appreciative of these gains, members of the “one-and-a-half generation” were also keen (and given opportunity) to give public voice to their concerns for the “second generation” and the future of their churches more generally. It is significant that an organisational entity formed by the “first generation” for the express purposes of promoting church cohesiveness and solidarity is now serving to gather, inspire, resource, and release members of the “one-and-a-half generation” to spiritually envision the “second generation.”

As a result, a vision for an inter-church Nepali youth fellowship, outings, and outreach concerts is currently being formed under the leadership of the London Region Youth Coordinator, Pastor Dorjey Timothy Tamang of the London Family Church in Camden. By bringing together the “generational and cross-cultural bridges” from each “Youth Fellowship” this initiative aims to help Nepali young people “know Christ, know each other, and make Christ known.” With regard to immediate priorities, Timothy commented that, “We have been good [as a community] at relating to God and telling others about Jesus but [at present] the focus is on [simply] getting to know each other.” This does not come at the expense of “knowing Christ” and “making Him known” but comes in the midst of these activities; leading to deeper, more meaningful relationships and greater, broader, kingdom impact.

Indeed, a member of the “one-and-a-half generation” recognised that in this context “knowing each other” should include the whole body of Christ and not just youths in other Nepali fellowships; an insight pursued in the following section.

3.2 Local churches in the UK

Inchley has suggested that the development of a relationship between a Nepali diaspora church and a local UK “host” congregation could be an important indicator of the Nepali church’s ability to provide for its future generations. The anticipated future need for convenient and trusted access to an English language service for its young people is cited as the primary reason for this.

On the ground, the efficacy of such relationships seems to be influenced by several variables. For instance, a greater degree of multiculturalism in the host congregation is thought to contribute to a closer relationship with the diaspora congregation. Diaspora fellowships that form from within a host fellowship are typically seen to enjoy better relationships than those that gather independently and then subsequently attach themselves to a host church. Some of these relationships are purely based on financial transactions corresponding to premises rental whilst others see the pastor of the Nepali congregation taking leadership responsibilities in the “host” congregation and its Nepali members thoroughly involved in both fellowships.

These are complex and interrelated issues that call for further research. Here, we shall focus on the possible implications for the UNRC.

Whilst it has strong, supportive relationships with Nepali churches in Hong Kong and the UK, my prayer is that connections with local churches would be made that transcend the conventional and demonstrate the potential of deep, inter-cultural, inter-church friendships to bless and transform. This would not be expressed through UK churches “adopting” a mono-cultural congregation or through ministry “to”, “through” or “by and beyond” the diaspora. Rather, it
A new type of relationship needs to emerge between local and diaspora Christian communities: friendships that have the potential to mutually transform, resource, and release both parties to fulfil their part in the mission of God.

This article has also argued that a new type of relationship needs to emerge between local and diaspora Christian communities: friendships that have the potential to mutually transform, resource, and release both parties to fulfil their part in the mission of God.

It may be that such relationships will enable Sornim, together with the many Nepali Christians who share his heart, to bring God’s love back to the land from whence it came. MRT

1 Johnston and Merrill define the “one-and-a-half generation” as “those who were brought to a new land as children and quickly become Westernized.” Patrick Johnston and Dean Merrill, Serving God in a Migrant Crisis: Ministry to People on the Move (Colorado Springs: GMI, 2016), 61. The term is defined more specifically by age-group in Rubin Rumbaut, “Ages, Life Stages, and Generational Cohorts: Decomposing the Immigrant First and Second Generations in the United States,” International Migration Review 38, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 1160–1205. In this present article, however, the “one-and-a-half generation” describes those who embody both the “home” and the “host” cultures, with the “first” generation identifying primarily with their “home” culture, and the “second” primarily with the “host” culture. This follows Chan, who describes the “one-and-a-half generation” as those who share the “cultural characteristics of both the first- and second-generation immigrants.” Arlene Chan, The Chinese in Toronto from 1872 to 2011 (Toronto: Dundurn, 2011), 1070.

2 Krishna P. Adhikari, Nepal in the United Kingdom: An Overview (Reading: Centre for Nepali Studies United Kingdom, 2012), 110–112. It is currently estimated that there are approximately 78,000–85,000 Nepali residents in the UK and 2,000–3,000 Nepali Christians in the UK.


8 Peter Brierley, Capital Growth (Tombridge: ADBC, 2013), 147.

9 Interestingly, the first “church” service was actually in one of the elders’ houses. The following week they had their first service in a church building. The name United Nepali Revival Church was officially adopted on 20 March 2011 and the first communion service was on 24 April of the same year.

10 On the issue of integration with the UK church, Ram Gidoomal notes that “it is very easy for South Asian Christians to stay separate from the mainline churches in [the UK]. There are so many factors that make it difficult to integrate with the body of Christ.” Ram Gidoomal, “South Asian Concern’s Roots,” in Diaspora Missions: The Story of South Asian Concern, Arif Mohamed, with Ram Gidoomal, Robin Thomson, and Raju Abraham (London: South Asian Concern, c.2015), 141.

11 Their lack of formal training was largely due to lack of opportunity and resources. Training during this period was primarily conducted by visiting Pastors/Teachers from churches in Nepal.


14 Here, I am simply contrasting Nepali churches with local churches in the UK which have no significant Nepali presence.


16 Inchley, The Nepali Diaspora, 383.


18 Wan, Diaspora Missiology, 133–135.


ur thinking about missions invariably asks questions of what is the biblical and theological basis behind mission. The answers to such questions are long standing and well documented. Since God’s command to Abraham to “go” and be a blessing to all nations (Gen 12:1–3), there has been a succession of examples in Scripture and history of individuals influencing and being catalysts to God’s purposes amongst the nations. Amongst the many examples of mission available to us through the record of Scripture and the history of the church, there is a significant subset which stems from the movement of people across borders. Opportunities for the gospel are in many ways enhanced when people move across borders. Sometimes freedom from the constraints of one’s own social context allows a person to not only hear the gospel but to also act upon what is heard. Frequently, movements across borders enable non-Christian people groups to come into contact with followers of Jesus, and subsequently engage with the gospel, which many people respond to. Additionally, such movements carry believers as agents for the gospel from one place to another. Currently, there are 214 million people classified as international migrants, and a further 740 million as internal migrants or people who move within a country from within their people group, to live in the context of another majority culture. By 2050, it is estimated that the number of international migrants worldwide will reach 405 million. This unprecedented movement of peoples constitutes a unique opportunity for mission.

The biblical foundations related to movements of people across borders and from one culture to another are highly significant. In looking at biblical examples of people in such positions we see many outcomes with corresponding significance in furthering the gospel to the ends of the earth. It is often said that the concept of the “foreigner” within missions is two-fold: going as a foreigner to a people and coming as a foreigner amongst a people. Both dynamics are significant for the gospel and God’s purposes amongst the nations.

The concept of migration in the Bible begins in God’s command to Adam to “fill the earth” (Gen 1:28). God never intended his people to be restricted to one place or even one nation. In fact, the concept of a “sojourner,” “stranger,” “alien,” or “foreigner” in the Bible includes temporary and permanent migrants and means “to dwell for a time in another land which is not one’s own.” The Old Testament provided instructions for caring for migrants and foreigners in the community (for example, providing for foreigners during the Passover in Exod 12:43–49). In addition, God commands his people to care for foreigners in their midst (e.g., in Lev 19:9, 33–34). Throughout the Old Testament, one common theme of mission occurs repeatedly: that God’s people are blessed in order to

**Throughout the Old Testament, one common theme of mission occurs repeatedly: that God’s people are blessed in order to be a blessing to others. God not only desires that all people would come to know him, but desires that the care provided by his people to those yet to know him would be an avenue of witness, and this includes migrants, be they temporary or permanent.**
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In moving beyond Old Testament foundations, we discover that parts of the New Testament are built on this understanding of migrants/diaspora and the unique gospel opportunities afforded to and by them. This is exemplified particularly in Acts, and also in the great commission given by Jesus to the disciples in Matthew 28:19, to “go and make disciples of every nation,” and in Matthew 22:39, where he emphasizes that we are to “Love your neighbour as yourself.” Central to this, is understanding God’s heart for all people. We see this exemplified time and again, sometimes through the life of a key migrant becoming a blessing to the nation of sojourn. However, sometimes this is also through the very people from the nation of sojourn, being a blessing to migrants and also to their own people and nation.

Examples include:

- **Joseph**: a son of Israel who was able to save Egypt from famine and ultimately provide for the preservation of Abraham’s progeny—the children of Israel—by his standing and credibility with Pharaoh.

- **Daniel**: taken into captivity in Babylon, he experienced the value of Nebuchadnezzar’s policy of providing paths of opportunity for young forced migrants. In this context of positive opportunity for engagement in a new culture and context, Daniel takes his primary bearing from within his relationship with God. Throughout the years, this relationship with God remained firm and steady and led to opportunities for God’s purposes to be made manifest (Dan 6:16, 20–22).

- **The Antioch church**: as described in Acts 11:19, this was essentially a church comprised of refugees. The church became one of the most significant and influential mission sending centres in early Christianity, possibly due to the experiences, migrant mindset, and awareness of its leaders.

- **The Apostle Paul**: born in Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia and a Roman province, and sent as an international student to Jerusalem to obtain higher education, Paul comes into a context where he hears the gospel.

- **In the book of Acts, Paul pleads with Philemon to receive Onesimus, his escaped slave, as a brother in Christ. This is a unique example of the gospel crossing social and class divides within a diasporic context.**

- **In Acts 24, 25, and 26 Paul stands before Felix and Festus. Both were influential Roman officials who were temporary migrants due to work and who heard the gospel from Paul in their line of duty.**

- **Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18)**: itinerant business people who had experienced circular migration, having been forced to move from Rome to Greece when the emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from the capital, and who functioned as agents of the gospel and supporters of mission (through Paul).

- **Apollos (Acts 18)**: an example of an academic on the move, who came to fully understand the gospel and went on to fulfill God’s purposes for him as an enlightened teacher.

- **Lydia**: a migrant business woman who came to Philippi from Thyatira. While there, she heard the gospel and shared it amongst her household and village, many of whom may also have been migrants.

Biblical examples of diaspora stories are significant as they show God at work in and through migrants. Often that work was wider than just the communication of the gospel in some form or another, as it may also have effected local communities, national contexts, and even international policy, so that they reflected the character and nature of God and his purposes. Note that the context into which the early church came into being was one in which a significant movement of people crossed borders for a diversity of reasons. Many of these movements revealed God’s purposes to bless the early church and those they came into contact with.

From Pentecost at the beginning of Acts, diaspora have played a significant role in establishing the church and initiating mission. According to George Wieland, reading Acts missionally leads to the realisation that the examples of Scripture can influence and motivate people to leadership and action. Being aware of such biblical examples can encourage individuals whom God has sovereignly placed or allowed to be in a position to influence policy outcomes for the gospel, in particular, the gospel in and through diaspora. The Seoul Declaration on Diaspora Missiology speaks of a “missiological framework for understanding and participating in God’s redemptive mission among people living outside their place of origin.” It is of enormous strategic importance that we focus our understanding of mission to include mission to, through, and from, the diaspora of the world. We, the authors of this article, work among international students, a small but strategic subset of diaspora, and from this we draw some illustrations that reflect God’s work and purposes to, in, and through people who are part of diaspora movements, of which international education is but one.

The following returnee’s story from the the International Student Ministries of New Zealand (ISMNZ) ministry context exemplifies this heart. “Kai” came from a non-Christian background and from a family with influence in business in their local community. Kai’s country of origin had a population of some 70 million, and a small but
The era of international education

Many Malaysians studied in New Zealand and Australia during the 1970s and 1980s and have gone on to play significant roles within the family business back home. Some students involved with ISMNZ became friends with Kai and as a result Kai joined an exploratory Bible discussion group. A few months later, after many questions and some struggles, Kai made a commitment to Jesus. The Bible studies continued, church was then introduced to the picture, and eventually one-to-one discipling. Student camps and other events provided added encouragement. Kai began growing and growing and growing. Jesus became important, indeed special, and he began changing Kai’s outlook on life. The ISMNZ worker, Kai’s church pastor, Kai’s Bible study cell leader, and Christian student friends all contributed to Kai understanding God’s call.

Graduation loomed but Kai did not feel “ready to go home and serve the Lord. My home, my city, my people are ungodly. I don’t feel strong enough.” So, [Kai] stayed and embarked on an ISMNZ ministry internship (ISMNZ offers internships, partnering with Pathways Bible College, to a few students who have a strong sense of God’s call on their lives.)

Kai was a great intern. After graduating from the internship, Kai started the journey of being a disciple of Christ at home amongst family and community in a culture that is foreign to biblical values. The looming struggle for Kai seemed to be insurmountable except for the biblical, spiritual, and ministry foundation afforded by the internship. A missionary serving in Kai’s home country provided a link with a church that encouraged and nurtured this transition. Kai found friends and adjusted to life at home, found a life partner and married, and then found a ministry context which flowed from a home group into a church planting initiative. Kai became a leader in that initiative and now today, twelve years later, is part of a pastoral team of five couples, providing pastoral oversight for a growing church of over 700 members with a significantly large footprint of outreach.

Stories such as Kai’s, are a common outcome of investment into the lives of international students. Such stories are encouraging, but only represent the tip of the iceberg for potential mission to, in, and through international students. International students are ubiquitous in this world and cross borders seeking advantages and opportunities for their lives, yet their greatest opportunity rests with hearing and responding to the gospel. Sometimes they may be the means for the gospel to be carried to the very people amongst whom they study. Think for a moment of the great sacrifice missionaries often make for the sake of the gospel and the considerable costs to the church associated with sending. No one begrudges these sacrifices and costs as they are made in response to the Lord’s call on our lives. Yet the Lord has also allowed other means for the hearing of the gospel and for engaging in mission, and that is mission based on returnees.

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Retaining international graduates who grow in mission involvement in their home countries can complement traditional mission approaches. It may not replace conventional mission sending, but it may offer a uniquely strategic approach that has the added advantage of providing the members of local churches a direct opportunity to engage in hands-on mission. The very process of engagement with international students provides indications and motivations for other forms of cross-cultural service, such as mission within local diaspora communities and preparation for other forms of mission sending.

Think how God's purposes were met through returnees, such as Moses, Naomi, and Nehemiah, and how the early church was established in Antioch and Rome through returnees who responded to the gospel on the day of Pentecost. During the Colombo plan3 era of international education in New Zealand and Australia, many South-East Asian students returned home as Christians and over time matured into Christian leaders. One such leader is Jerry Dusing who came to Christ whilst a student at Canterbury University and who is now the senior leader of a church network in East Malaysia.4 Many Malaysians studied in New Zealand and Australia during the 1970s and 1980s and have gone on,
like Jerry, to become influential church leaders. Many began their working life following their field of study, but God later called them to be pastors, evangelists, teachers, and apostles in mission, as they saw the need and engaged with their societies. Many others could be listed, but some prefer not to have their names mentioned as they are working in restricted-access places. Even so, two very high profile names spring to mind. The first is Dr. Patrick Fung, the current General Director of OMF. Patrick became a Christian whilst studying in Sydney, Australia. The other great example is Bakht Singh, who returned to India after studying in the USA where he became a Christian. Though his life is now over, his dedication to establishing the church in India has ensured that his legacy continues.

Numerous advantages can be seen in mission engagement through returning international students. However, not all returnee stories are successful, and frequently returnees are far from being ready to engage. Hence there is much work that needs to be done to ensure high levels of success for this mode of mission. To this end, it is important that we focus workers into this aspect of the harvest field. In calling people to mission we need to recognise the extent and the avenue for mission amongst international students. For example, in our New Zealand context, international students, drawn from 180 countries, comprise 3 percent of the total population, yet the church does not set aside 3 percent of its outreach resources and personnel there. This 3 percent renews itself every three or four years, so is indeed a unique opportunity for mission. It is a wonderful and also cost-effective way of engaging in mission as well as in local outreach. High concentrations of international students can be found in many places and these can be identified as places where a focus can greatly impact mission. Furthermore, drawing from our New Zealand context, we find that a further 25 percent of the population are international migrants, which coincidently is almost equivalent to the million plus (ca. 25 percent of the population) of New Zealanders who live and work in other countries. The 25 percent of new New Zealanders (migrants) is both an opportunity to reach people of other languages and cultures and is also a means of renewing the church.

New Zealand is a country like many others, built on migration, and within that context of people moving across borders, there is a rich history of mission to, through, and from diaspora. Many stories could be written to illustrate mission that features the diverse ways and means that God uses to call people into relationship with himself. To some, diaspora is a word that sounds like a pill we need to swallow to fix something wrong with us. And in reality diaspora missiology is like a pill the wider church needs to take so that the fog shrouding our vision might be lifted for us to see people as God sees them—diverse but his children, people within whom he can work, through whom he can work, and eminently loved and valued.

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God’s Heart for Mission

As we have seen, God’s heart for mission is evidenced throughout the Old and New Testaments. For example, Isaiah 51:4 says that Israel is to be a light to the nations: a missionary force to all the nations. Also, in the book of Jonah, Jonah is sent to be a missionary to Nineveh and the Assyrians, to tell the people of Nineveh that God has seen their sins and that they will be destroyed. The result is mass repentance and sorrow on the part of the people of Nineveh; they believe God’s message, repent, and are spared destruction. The culmination of God’s heart for mission is found in the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19–20, “Go and make disciples of all nations!” Yet, as we have already seen, there is also a second dimension of mission. The command in Luke 8:39 to: “Return home and tell how much God has done for you!”

The account of Pentecost in Acts 1 and 2 highlights this dimension. Indeed, Acts 1:8 states that the disciples were to become “witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). In addition, we note that people from the many and varied cultures present on the day of Pentecost played a significant part in taking the gospel back to their home contexts. The churches in Antioch and Rome are famous examples of returnee-established churches.

To conclude, in our modern world, we need to be aware of trends in people movements and opportunities for the gospel to flow in the wake of such movements. International education,
business, refugees, labour supply, and many forms of migration both within and outside of one’s home country offer unique opportunities for the Church to engage in mission: mission to, through, and from diaspora to a world that needs to hear the good news. MRT

Recent publications on diaspora:


M. Daniel Carroll R., Christians at the Border: Immigration, the Church, and the Bible, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2013).


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Multi-dimensional Discipling for Diaspora Communities: Partnership between Host Church, Ethnic Church, and Parachurch Organizations

Carolyn Kemp

Carolyn joined OMF International in 1993 and was a church planter for several years in Manila’s slums before joining the Diaspora Returnee Ministries (DRM) Field where she has been serving for fourteen years, the last seven years as DRM Field Director. Working in thirteen countries, DRM focuses on contextualised, intentional in-depth discipling, training, and coaching of East Asian academics, business people, and migrant workers living outside their home country. Carolyn is a member of NextMove, a global collaboration group working across mission agencies facilitated by Frontier Ventures. Carolyn leads the Returnee Team, a global think-tank of returnee ministry.

Introduction

Never has the need for intentional partnerships been more important than now. The challenge that confronts the local church, ethnic churches, and parachurch organizations in a host country with a view to discipling diaspora communities is immense. Whether they know it or not they need each other more than ever.

I’m constantly confronted with the challenge of discipleship across these contexts. The need for contextualized discipling that is multi-dimensional and influences diaspora communities is critical. Even so, there are very few good examples at the grassroots level. We need complementary, not conflicting, models of partnership that express cooperation and trust. The urgency to address this issue can’t be underestimated.

Globally, there is a definite awakening to the potential of reaching the world’s seething number of migrants. Migration and diaspora have become missional buzzwords. This is not surprising when

More than 247 million people, or 3.4 percent of the world population, live outside their countries of birth. Although the number of international migrants rose from 175 million in 2000 to more than 247 million in 2013 and will surpass 251 million in 2015, the share of migrants has remained just above three percent (of world population) for the last fifteen years.¹

More than 20 percent of all international students globally are Mainland Chinese and this is increasing all the time. According to a 2016 report by the Chinese Ministry of Education, 523,700 Chinese students went abroad to study in 2015 and about 70 to 80 percent of the students abroad have returned to China in recent years. The graph on the next page, from the report, shows the figures from 2010 to 2015.
This presents a unique and God-given opportunity as people who live overseas express a greater openness to exploring issues of faith. Being away from their home culture removes social constraints and peer pressure so that they have greater freedom to seek God, trust Christ, and learn to live with the leading of the Spirit.

However, of those who consider or respond to the claims of Christ while overseas only 20 percent or fewer continue to follow the Lord after returning home. When we think of the opportunity presented to us through diaspora ministry, this statistic is frankly appalling. If 80 percent of Boeing aircraft crashed, there would be an immediate investigation. Aircraft would be grounded until Boeing got to the bottom of the problem and corrected it. Similarly, until we address the issues surrounding this fall-out rate we will lose one of the most profound mission opportunities of modern times.

One key factor is a lack of contextualized discipleship designed to prepare returnees to stand firm as Christians back home. That preparation must start in the host culture and for that to take place a multidimensional relational discipleship model needs to be adopted which includes input from the host church, the ethnic church, and parachurch organizations. This paper seeks to present such a model.

This model aims to work backwards, starting with the context of the home culture to which overseas students, businessmen/women, and migrant workers will return. However, since many of them live in and travel to different places—for example, two years in the UK then on to the USA for another few years—before returning home, we are talking of the need for a global mobile movement to equip them to become not only disciples of Christ but also cross-cultural ministers of the gospel who share Christ wherever they go.

Defining terms

Before we continue, I will clarify some of the key terms used in this paper. The term “return” refers to those who, having been abroad for a number of months or years, “return” to their home country. They may be students, migrant workers, or people involved in business. The key factor is that they will at some point return to their own culture and country, whether this takes a few months or a number of years. It is important therefore, when we come alongside someone who will return, that we intentionally nurture and disciple them from the first meeting with this in mind. While contextualized evangelism is just as important as contextualized discipleship, this paper will concentrate on contextualized discipleship.

When I write about “contextualization” I mean being culturally sensitive and appropriate to the context, history, values, language, and forms of expression of one’s home culture. It’s about seeing all the dimensions of the gospel impacting and relating to all the dimensions of a culture. It’s about sensitively taking all aspects of culture and worldview into consideration when relating the gospel story in order to communicate effectively and make Christ understood. It’s about seeing the gospel within a culture and worldview inform, challenge, and direct it.

When I use the term “discipleship” I am not talking about a program but about intentionally journeying with someone so that Christ becomes preeminent in life and ministry, impacting decisions, choices, focus, and worldview. It is not just about Bible study, although that is critically important, but it’s about the choices and decisions made, and the way time and talents are used. It’s about bringing Christ into the moments and completely trusting in his sovereignty and rule. It’s about submission to the lordship of Christ. This can only be modelled as we live our lives before men, openly and with transparency. Discipleship is a life-long journey.

When I talk about “multi-dimensional relationships” I mean that we need to acknowledge that it takes many people to help forge another individual. Each of us is engaged in many relationships that impact us. I talk to some of my friends about family, to others about my ministry, and to yet others about church. There is a smaller group with whom I walk through issues of a more personal nature. There are very few people that I talk to about all areas of life. Every day I am influenced and shaped by many different people who help me enter their experiences and understandings of a wide variety of issues. A healthy disciple needs to be exposed to various kinds of people who bring a richness to the discipleship process and journey that should be embraced.

The interaction between the host church, ethnic church, and parachurch coming together to disciple returnees puts the emphasis on the individual being disciples, and displays a kingdom perspective in which the global church has a role to play. This multidimensional discipleship allows each entity—host church, ethnic church, and parachurch—to work to their strengths to impact the life of an individual so that the disciple can be stronger than he or she would be otherwise.

As we will see below, when we bring all those definitions together and think about multi-dimensional discipleship for a student or migrant worker, we are talking about the focus being on the breadth of relationships impacting the life of the disciple so that the discipleship itself can be more effective.

The following scenarios help cement the definitions:
The Indonesian migrant worker in Taiwan who is being reached and nurtured by an OMF worker (a member of a parachurch organization providing contextual discipleship), and is working for a Taiwanese Christian employer (who attends a host church), and meets members of a local Indonesian (ethnic) church has a multi-dimensional discipleship experience. Everyone involved—the OMF worker, the employer, and the ethnic church members—will bring a unique (while biblical) perspective and breadth to the disciple ship of this worker.

The Chinese student in the UK who is attending an “introductory Bible study on the Christian faith” run by a parachurch organization, and having one-on-one discussions with an OMF worker in his native language (a member of parachurch organization providing contextualised disciple ship), while attending the global café run by the host church which provides a broader experience of Christian community, and the local Chinese (ethnic) church giving cultural context is also experiencing multi-dimensional discipleship. Each one provides input and plays a critical role in nurturing this student in the faith—the primary focus being equipping the student for future ministry wherever he may go with the aim that he will be able to effectively live as a Christian when he returns to his home country.

The Chinese businessman in Kenya who joins a Bible study group with other Chinese (run by the parachurch organization OMF), and attends an international service run by the local Kenyan church with the help of an OMF member (bringing a host church and parachurch organization together), while also attending the local Chinese (ethnic) church learns through these multi-dimensional discipleship encounters.

Each of these relationships help enrich the faith journey of these new Christians from different perspectives. Each may emphasise different aspects of what it means to follow Jesus in situations relevant to their own cultural backgrounds. But when put together there is a depth in the discipleship in which the new Christian learns about unity in diversity, allowing him or her to grow and develop a broader kingdom perspective and worldview.

The Context

In the following section we will consider some of the issues which must inform how we disciple returnees while they are still in a host context. By way of example we will look at the challenges faced by two groups of returnees—Japanese and Mainland Chinese—although returnees of many other nationalities also face the same issues.

Case study 1: Japanese returnees and the context they face

Japanese returnees who come to Christ overseas face numerous challenges. Though there are more, we will identify and explore two key areas: culture and church.

Culture: Anyone who leaves his or her own culture for any length of time adapts in many ways to the new culture. They take on new mannerisms, changing to blend in and achieve a degree of integration. Adaptation comes first in areas which least impact one’s value systems. Deeper levels of culture may change more slowly but will cause greater disruption when the person returns home. For instance, since Japanese society is hierarchical—based on Confucian teaching—older people should always be treated with respect. And though most societies show respect for the elderly, how this is expressed varies. For Japanese, this includes never addressing older people by their first names. Similarly, Japan is a group-oriented society that places a high value on preserving the harmony of the group. It’s important to “read between the lines” and say things that do not disrupt harmony. Returnees who have adjusted to living in a culture that greatly values individualistic behavior, direct speech, and an openness to express personal feelings and ideas may find relating Japanese cultural norms to be extremely frustrating if not impossible. In some cases, returnees may feel that people at home are less warm simply because they are more reserved and a longer time is needed to build relationships of trust and friendship in Japan. Though these things may appear small and, due to the subtleties of culture, go unnoticed, they can also reveal a bigger problem of what is known as reverse culture shock. When people return to their own culture, expecting that nothing has changed, they may face a larger shock to discover that they have adapted to a host culture all too well and just don’t fit in at home anymore.

Church: The church in any society is a sub-culture of the whole. In churches where no one has lived abroad, there is very little understanding of a returnee’s experience. At the very least there is a cautiousness to what is unknown.

A Japanese OMF colleague recently shared what returnees generally experience:

The local church member welcomes returnees by treating them as they would anyone else, cautiously, with this message: “Forget what you experienced in the West. Concentrate on what you have in front of you.” Returnees feel rejected, and although they may have things they want to share, the sharing is unwelcome. While overseas the returnee had been welcomed into a church with often-targeted enthusiasm, taken on outings, put onto a “host” scheme, and was set apart from the beginning. Yet at home in the local church they seem almost invisible.

Another area of tension is that pastors in Japan prepare baptismal candidates in great depth so they will be able to stand firm in a secular world in which 99 percent of the people claim to be Buddhist and Shintoist. Pastors find it hard to accept the seemingly poor level of preparation the returnees had while abroad. It is the returnee who feels the full impact of such insightful judgments by Japanese pastors, which unfortunately, are often quite correct. Some churches distinguish markedly between church members and non-members. Returnees are initially considered as non-members, thus accentuating their feelings of isolation at church. If they had been nurtured in English overseas, it is difficult for them to go on to read the Bible and pray in Japanese, let alone understand Japanese Christian jargon, something which increases the sense of isolation and difference.

Even returnees from Japanese churches abroad have a hard time trying to settle into local churches in Japan as they are required to show loyalty to church and to the
denomination in equal measure. They often wonder where loyalty to God really lies. In Japanese churches overseas, returnees are encouraged to help in church life soon after baptism, because the churches are small and relationships are closer. In Japan, they are expected to watch and learn for a while—at least a year—and then are slowly given tasks. Japanese face reverse culture shock in general.

Case study 2: Chinese returnees and the context they face

Sometimes we find that our new Chinese friend had become a Christian in China. However, more often than not, their every relationship—whether with family members, friends, or co-workers—is with non-Christians. While overseas, Chinese students are attracted to Christian groups because of their need for community. When they return home, it works in the opposite direction as they are flung back into a network of relationships which may now entail conflicts due to changed values arising from their Christian faith. This increases stress and isolation. The cross-cultural friendships that they enjoyed in Christian groups overseas are all gone. All of the available social activities are now hosted by non-Christians. Adjustments need to be made at every turn: living with parents and other family members again, losing privacy and independence, discovering how much everything changed while they were away, and experiencing deep feelings of not belonging and not fitting in. Finding and keeping jobs, joining the fast-paced world of work, and climbing the corporate ladder can be all consuming and overwhelming.

It is within this backdrop that returnees have to make many major, life-changing decisions in the first year after returning. These range from finding a job where one’s relational networks are diminished and competition is brutal to getting married—frequently facing great pressure to marry a non-Christian. Then there is the decision to identify oneself as a Christian or not! These may be compounded by questions and doubts about the faith and other issues. Was that just part of the overseas experience? Where is there a church anyway? Those who find a church and seek to grow as a Christian often face long work hours, not to mention a long commute. Opposition from people holding other beliefs and value systems is encountered in the workplace as well as the family. Since their personal values have changed with their newfound faith and through their overseas experiences, it is no longer possible to agree with the old way of doing things.

What could make a difference to returnees who are facing such pressures? What could change the experience of Chinese returnees looking for jobs? What could change the experience of the local church in Japan when a returnee joins their fellowship? What difference would a multi-dimensional model of discipleship make with the above case studies in mind?

The role of the host and ethnic (Japanese and Chinese) churches in the host country and the parachurch organization

Example 1: Reaching out and welcoming in

There can be no doubt that the host church is making a huge impact on reaching out to international students and workers. It is often the place where they go either to learn the language of the host country or observe culture. Many churches have an excellent “welcoming ministry”. However, in their exuberance to reach out and make international visitors feel welcomed and wanted, many churches have inadvertently started them on a journey which one day will alienate them from their own people and church when they return home.

Although the host church may have shared with the diaspora visitor how Christian community can function, it has only shared part of what life in community is, not the whole diverse story. This is because community includes the daily serving of others, which is often a role in the shadows. There also comes a point in church life when one moves from being a “visitor” (who is treated as such) to someone who is part of the community, and then moves into a relationship in which they become like the host who considers the needs of others and serves them.

An ethnic Japanese or Chinese church might have much to teach new Japanese or Chinese Christians about how these transitions take place within their culture. The Japanese church in the host culture, although different from the Japanese church in Japan, is at the very least one step closer to what they will return to. The subtleties and nuances of culture and communication within the Christian context is a necessary learning curve for the returnee. Things such as Christian terminology and the nature and expression of service are not easily learnt in a host church. In the long term, the returnee’s transition home will be greatly aided by being effective and fully grown in the things of Christ in their home language and cultural context.

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Whether consciously or unconsciously, it’s not uncommon for returnees to exhibit a superiority complex. After all, not everyone has had the opportunity to study abroad or get an advanced degree, and not everyone has gone through such hardship in the process. Even if you don’t really know a lot, at least you’ve been to a foreign country and you’ve seen and experienced more than others. Thus, you gain a special identity on returning to your own country, hometown, or church. Yet without a “humble attitude”, it
will be very difficult to identify with others or be accepted by them.

Surely there is a special role here for the ethnic church. There is a way of being which is often overlooked by the host church, a posture which is culturally embedded. Humility can be felt as much as it can be seen.

People with cross-cultural experience who work with parachurch organizations can act as a bridge between the host and ethnic churches, serving both as a conduit of communication and trust. We should not minimize the critical role of bridge building—it is a requirement in our multicultural communities.

I will say more about the role of the parachurch organization below.

**Example 2: Discipleship issues**

One issue which always comes up in my conversations with church leaders in Asia is baptism. This should not be treated as one-size-fits-all concept in view of the fact that baptism needs to reflect the symbolism of dying to the old life and putting on the new. As many local churches in the West know little of the context of an “old life” (which includes the unspoken beliefs and values of a culture), there are limitations to how fully they can disciple regarding the issues concerned or prepare new believers so that they can live the “new life” in their home settings.

Discipleship needs to take place in a context. There are broad brushstrokes which the local church in a host country is fully capable of making when discipling diaspora communities. For example, the foundations of the faith are universal and part of the reality of being members of the body of Christ is experiencing diversity. I am convinced that God’s purpose in taking people “overseas” from their home country is to expose them to a diversity of experiences as part of the process of knowing him. This is highlighted very clearly in Paul’s sermon at the Aeropagus. “From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us” (Acts 17:26-27).

However, what does the Western church in general know about ancestor worship or the complex responsibilities of the oldest son? How can we best help a new believer from overseas see this through Christian eyes? How can we help them to develop a biblical perspective and worldview that will enable them to be both members of their home culture and faithful Christians? What about the complex issues of harmony and respect for elders? How can the Western church help a new believer from Asia wrestle with such issues from a Christian perspective when it plays a diminished role in our own culture? How can the Western church address the issues of the spirit world and animism when it rarely acknowledges the spirit world in Scripture? As new believers prepare to return to their home countries, how do we help them wrestle with these complex issues?

Western discipleship methodology is often far too prescriptive and often relevant only to our limited context. In many cases, little thought has been put into the day-to-day lives of those we disciple even in our own context. Do we disciple people on issues pertaining to the workplace and the marketplace? How does the church equip people to live out their faith in a non-Christian family? Do we consider the context of those we disciple regardless of background? Do we ask what they need to live fruitful lives for Christ in their home society, family, and workplace? If such questions are important for people from our own culture, they are even more critical for those living and working in a very different context from our own.

Ethnic churches in the host country are more likely to have thought through issues of baptism and discipleship for their own diaspora community (although not always with the view of candidates returning “home” in the near future). They know what to look for and the subtleties of expression needed to guide new disciples into areas of freedom from the past and to prepare them for the future. Returnees need to see how Christ is expressed within their own culture, how being a follower of Jesus is modelled and lived out on a daily basis, and how their own cultural community expresses Christian community. This in no way diminishes the role of the discipler who is not of the same cultural background in the discipling process. What it does say is that the more culturally relevant the discipler can be, the deeper the understanding and application will be for the disciple. We all learn in community. We learn about ourselves and about others. We learn more about the different aspects of the character of God in community. The ethnic church can bring new believers a step closer to contextualized community living by helping them engage with issues of importance to their culture so that they can take every thought captive and make it obedient to Christ.

**What can be done?**

**A kingdom building partnership**

Many other issues make life for the returnee both challenging and exciting. But when the host church, ethnic church, and parachurch organization work together, they can make a greater difference than if they work separately! The kingdom perspective does not say “this returnee belongs to this church (or this organization), therefore…” but “what does this returnee/new Christian need to live for Christ and serve him wherever he or she goes?”

While host churches might not know what specific questions to ask in relation to the old life and how to prepare for specific aspects of the new life for the returnee getting ready to go home, they can and do play a significant role in welcoming and discipling diaspora believers in the foundations of the faith. In this way host churches are conduits of real grace and unconditional friendship. They are often less mono-cultural in their missiology, something which is greatly needed in our multicultural communities.

Diaspora Chinese or Japanese churches differ from their counterpart churches in the home country. The simple fact that a church is in a diaspora setting will effect changes which separate it from its cultural roots. Even so, it is closer to the culture of an international student or worker than is a host church. They therefore provide a bridge between host and home cultures and provide a good place for new Christians to learn the subtleties of
how to express their faith appropriately in their own cultural context.

Since parachurch organizations exist to serve, they can often take a less “territorial” view where church is concerned. Looking in from the periphery, they can embrace both the host and ethnic church perspectives and act as a bridge between the host and ethnic churches. In so doing they can facilitate trust and respect between each group as they function in the life of the diaspora communities. Parachurch organizations can facilitate an objective coming together, a platform for communication, discussion, and true, valued partnerships. Often host churches need objectivity when it comes to cross-cultural contextualization. At such times, a parachurch organization with much experience serving a particular community (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Indonesian, etc.) can potentially bring that objectivity to bear. They can also train and equip host churches in specific aspects of a culture so that their communication will be culturally appropriate and understandable. They will also come with specific cultural understanding regarding church, family, and the spirit world of the culture in question.

Working together, the host churches, ethnic churches, and parachurch organizations can nurture and disciple diaspora believers so they can grow as members of the Christian community. The question should not be which church or group they belong to but how we can disciple them so they do not become cultural misfits. Our goal should be to see them living and working in whatever arena God has called them to, be it their own communities or another where they bring transformation through a powerful demonstration of the Spirit of God seen through contextualized theology and methodology which impacts society.

With this in mind, we need to see a greater commitment by all three parties—the host church, ethnic church, and parachurch—to come together. Effective partnerships take time and patience; often any initiative takes longer as more discussion is needed to bring everyone to the same place. Though we are often rushing to accomplish something, and partnering across cultures takes time, patience, and trust, we should continue to work together because the potential for rich rewards are great.

Could we see prayer groups coming together with members from the host church, ethnic church, and parachurch in cities where significant diaspora work is taking place—praying for the needs of the diaspora we are all working with? Could we also see multicultural forums held between these groups where discussions can build on the part we are all playing in the discipling of the internationals God has brought to us in our cities?

Could we invite representatives of the host church and ethnic church to events we run for those we disciple to build trust and kingdom perspective? Could we invite ethnic churches to join the host churches in outings they organize? If ethnic churches have special teaching weekends could they extend a welcome to host churches to send some representatives to join them, providing translation if needed? Could we see the special awareness training run by a parachurch organization—like OMF and the OMF Diaspora Returnee Ministries (DRM) Field—bring together host and ethnic churches?

I would like to close with two examples of host churches, ethnic churches, and parachurch organizations working together.

The first is a Chinese Returnee Retreat run by the OMF DRM in the UK and the USA for Chinese who will return home within the following year. Each retreat includes a small group of no more than twenty-five returnees. When we plan these events we invite members from the Chinese church and Chinese parachurch organizations in the host country, members of another parachurch organization, and representatives from host churches. Together we create a context in which we can all learn from each other and have effective and contextualized input into the lives of the returnees.

The second thing that OMF DRM engages in is cross-cultural training in all our centers. This includes participation from the host and ethnic churches and parachurch organizations.

We all know that there are more opportunities than we can cope with, as everyone is busy, churches have full programs, and the time we can spend with any one person is limited as demands on our time stretch us. For this reason, having a kingdom approach is critical. If we make efforts to help any student or contact gain access to other churches and groups then the input they will receive will be greater. If they can gain exposure to biblical teaching, mission training, and Christian community, does it really matter if this crosses the ministry lines of several groups or churches in one city? Surely the focus should be to encourage diaspora believers to engage with the wider community as much as they can while still overseas and experience more deeply what it means to live in community as a member of the body of Christ. There is no room for anyone saying only the Chinese can reach the Chinese, or only the Thai can reach the Thai. That is not kingdom theology or a biblical model of mission. We all need to come together as a family ordained by God to love one another and to reach out into our communities with the love of Christ in the power of his Spirit.

Conclusion

The need for multi-dimensional relational discipleship has never been more crucial. Only in relationships will the trust be built that is needed to work together with a kingdom perspective. The one-dimensional discipleship where the returnee only has the view of the host church, the ethnic church, or the parachurch increases the risk of returnees falling away from the faith. They need the much richer perspective that comes through multi-dimensional discipleship to help them learn across cultures and get nurtured from the perspectives of both the host and ethnic cultures. In this melting pot of cross-cultural experience and nurturing we can think missionally as we prepare returnees to go home. MRT


Preparation Diaspora Converts for their Return to East Asia

East Asians who convert to the Christian faith while living abroad face a unique challenge—after returning home they will need to live as Christians in a context that is very different from the one in which they came to faith. Not only will the home context be different, it will be many times more difficult.

In the early decades (1950s–80s) of international student ministry in the West, this reality was often ignored. The emphasis was on welcoming and extending hospitality to foreign students, with little thought given to the future prospects for those who came to faith in Christ.

Since the 1990s, however, as communications and ease of travel have improved, the full measure of the challenges new converts face in the East has been seen more clearly. Anecdotal evidence gathered in the author’s interviews with international student workers in 2010 indicated that a mass defection was taking place among returnees in China every year: 75 to 85 percent of those who had attended Christian meetings as students in the West never met with Christians in China, and thus fell away from the faith. In Japan informed sources have indicated that the defection rate is even higher.

This article will focus on the thousands of East Asian young people, especially the Mainland Chinese, who study at the university level in Western countries (USA, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, Netherlands, etc.). It must be kept in mind, however, that the East Asian diaspora population is much larger, more widely distributed, and more diverse than this.¹

Returnee challenges: A brief overview

Why is it that so many returnees are falling away? Why are we losing so many promising Chinese young people, for example, when they return to China? The change of context, already mentioned, is clearly the major factor. But we can be more specific than that. The following list provides a brief sketch of the kinds of challenges diaspora Chinese converts face upon their return.

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Isolation, Identity, and Culture Shock

Going home alone: From the moment a homeward-bound student boards the plane, all social support for his or her Christian faith is gone. The free dinners, outings, picnics, fun activities, and cross-cultural friendships that the student once enjoyed in Christian groups overseas have come to an end. Isolation immediately begins to take its toll.

For some students, there is a strong association between experiences in the West and the Christian faith and it can be hard to separate the two. This is especially true for those whose entire Christian experience has been in English. Having never discovered what it means to be a Chinese Christian, the students may unconsciously presume that leaving the West means leaving Christianity behind.

Adjusting once more to the traffic, noise, and crowded conditions of China may take some time. Some returnees now have concerns about food safety and the health effects of China’s air and water pollution, even if they never had these concerns before.

Re-entry (or reverse) culture shock begins to set in. This is usually unexpected, and can last from about six months to one year (or even longer). Returnees may struggle with feelings of not belonging and not fitting in. They may experience deep feelings of loss and “homesickness” for the host country. Since these feelings are not understood or appreciated by friends and relatives who have never left home, the returnees tend to withdraw and dream about going overseas again. Many find that their feelings are only understood by other returnees.

Family

For some, returning home means moving back in with parents and other family members. Every movement is under parental scrutiny. The freedom, privacy, independence, and personal space that students enjoyed overseas are gone.

Traditional Chinese families that practice ancestor worship or temple rituals will often expect or demand that their children participate. For new believers who are not prepared to negotiate their way through this conflict, the pressure can be intense and the result is often capitulation.

Female students, especially, may face pressure from their parents to marry non-Christians after they return. This can be very difficult to resist, especially when there are no eligible Christian men. Marrying a non-Christian, however, will make it difficult, if not impossible, to practice the Christian faith.

Work

Finding a job is usually not as easy as returnees expect. They often discover that there is intense competition for any job opening. This may predispose them to accept the first job that is offered. If they succeed in finding a job, they may immediately be faced with crushing and brutally long hours at work on top of a long commute. Chronic exhaustion can become a way of life.

The Chinese workplace often leads Christians into moral and ethical compromise. Cheating, lying to customers, bribery, corruption, kickbacks, tax evasion, false accounting, and alcohol abuse are often the norm. Employees may get fired because of compromise. Cheating, lying to customers, bribery, corruption, kickbacks, tax evasion, false accounting, and alcohol abuse are often the norm. Employees may get fired because of failure to go along with these practices.

Financial pressures to buy a house, or to repay relatives for financing their education, or cost to their spiritual lives.

Returning to seek the highest-paying positions, many returnees expect. They often discover that there is intense competition for any job opening. This may predispose them to accept the first job that is offered. If they succeed in finding a job, they may immediately be faced with crushing and brutally long hours at work on top of a long commute. Chronic exhaustion can become a way of life.

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Church

When returnees try to get involved in Chinese churches, they often discover that it is not easy. For those who do not live in the large cities or prefer not to join the registered Three-Self Church it may be difficult to locate a house church, since many are not registered and meet in undisclosed locations. Members of these churches have learned to be cautious after years of persecution, and newcomers may feel that they are not very welcoming. Returnees who attend house churches may also notice an often huge gap in age, education, and social status between themselves and the church members, which can make it hard for them to make friends or feel that they belong.

They often search for a church just like the one they attended while overseas, but of course it is impossible to find—there is no church like that in China. And so, after visiting two or three churches, they just give up. Returnees may also be concerned about the possibility of trouble with the authorities or career repercussions from attending Christian gatherings.

In cities where returnee fellowships exist, newly arrived returnees will often find a warm welcome. But these groups can be hard to find and many returnees do not even know they exist.

Given all of the challenges they face, there is little chance that Christian returnees will make it on their own. Their only chance of surviving as practicing Christians is to join a close-knit faith community which, as we have just noted, presents its own set of challenges.

Reducing the numbers of those who fall away

Is there anything that we can do in Western host countries to reduce the defection rate among returnees? The options for intervention fall into two general areas:

1. Pre-return preparation
2. Post-return connection to churches and returnee fellowships in East Asia

In this article we will focus on the first area—doing a better job of preparing new converts for their return. We will take it as a working hypothesis that pre-return preparation can be effective in reducing the rate of returnee defection.
But what, in practice, does pre-return preparation consist of? Or, given the fact that many diaspora field workers are already involved in some form of Bible study and discipleship training with East Asian students, perhaps we can ask the question in a different way: “What kind of discipleship training can we give students to make it less likely that they will fall away as returnees?”

We offer the following five suggestions as to how this might be done:

1. **Turn believers into doers**

The New Testament depicts a true disciple of Jesus as a doer, one who abides in his word and translates faith into action (John 8:31). Disciples are believers, to be sure, but a fully biblical response to Christ does not end with belief, as all too many have defined it, that is, a mental assent to certain doctrines. Instead, in the biblical disciple’s life there is a seamless and natural expression of faith in ways that other people can see and experience: good behaviour, good works, right living, actions that put the fruit of the Spirit on display before a watching world.

The New Testament always assumes that there will be this kind of harmonious integration between the disciple’s inward faith and outward action, a consistency between the inner life and the public persona.

In John 13, after washing the disciples’ feet and commanding them to follow his example, Jesus tells them, “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them” (John 13:17). Tellingly, the blessing comes, not in the knowing, but in the doing. It is only the true disciple, the practitioner, who discovers the blessing that lies, dormant but waiting, in the word of God.

James 1:22–25 is another passage that addresses the question of this integration of faith and action directly.

James sees any attempt to separate believing from doing as an aberration that requires correction. Listening to God’s word should naturally lead to doing what it says, and those who do this will “be blessed in what they do.” Apparently, James apprehended, even among the earliest Christians, a tendency to substitute mental assent for wholehearted obedience.

The New Testament also includes doing as a critical factor in the disciple’s witness to the world. Matthew 5:16 is an example of this.

In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. (NIV)

Believing flows naturally into doing, and those who witness the good deeds that result will experience God’s goodness in a way that leads to praise.

There is nothing in these verses that should lead anyone to question the clear teaching of Scripture on justification by faith alone. However, as Martin Luther said, “Good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works.” We are right to expect that the inward transformation of a disciple of Christ will be expressed in outward action, in behaviour, and in good deeds.

In the practice of diaspora ministry, then, it follows that we need to communicate and demonstrate that Christians are people who take action and do not just talk. Discipleship is not just a “mind game”, an empty intellectual pursuit. It is instead a purposeful quest for transformation—in the individual, in the family, and in society. The study of the Bible should bring about tangible changes in all areas of life.

It is important for those who disciple East Asian students to think of disciples as apprentices, those who are learning practical skills on the job by imitating a more experienced journeyman. In 1 Corinthians 11:1 Paul wrote, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” Again, the emphasis in Scripture is on a life on display, actions that can be seen and imitated. If East Asians become practitioners of God’s word while overseas, they will be better prepared to practice it in Asia.

Of course we cannot work with God to “turn believers into doers” until we first have believers! Faith always comes first. We hope that our disciples will have a clear and biblical understanding of the good news about Jesus and a genuine faith that emerges from this understanding. To this end, we never tire of proclaiming the good news accurately from the Scriptures in ways that make sense to East Asians. And we would do well to make sure that our disciples can explain the good news clearly to others before they return home.

But if we proclaim the good news to East Asians only verbally and not through action, we unwittingly encourage a “mental assent” view of faith. Our disciples may, with some justification, conclude that Christianity is mainly about words and ideas, rather than life transformation, and that these words and ideas may safely be discussed in private, without any impact or crossover into the public sphere. Is this the kind of Christianity that we want our disciples to take back to East Asia?

2. **Contextualise**

Contextualisation, if it is defined clearly and biblically,3 can often be a helpful conceptual tool in cross-cultural mission. But in ministry to East Asians in the diaspora it is important that we do not limit our thinking about this to macrocultures (Chinese, Japanese, Thai, etc.). To be as practical and helpful as possible, contextualisation should also be more granular, that is, more individualised and specific. This will involve delving into the microcultures and social groups to which our disciples will belong after they return home. One way of pursuing this is by sensitively asking our disciples about their home contexts so that we can educate ourselves about them.

It may help us to think of “contexts” sociologically, in terms of the specific social situations the disciple will face. We have shown that a disciple is a doer, one who translates faith into action. This action will inevitably take place, however, in a social context—not in an abstract communication space.
such as “culture” or “worldview”, not just in the realm of ideas or values, but in concrete social situations that make up the relational fabric of daily life: school, work, family, church.

These are the settings into which the disciple will bring the biblical message incarnationally, that is, physically—by means of his or her distinctive lifestyle, behaviour, and good works that display biblical values and mediate the biblical message.

In the practice of diaspora ministry, then, we need to somehow prepare our disciples for the challenges that these future East Asian social contexts will present, while, at the same time, helping them to see the wonderful opportunities they will have to be witnesses for Christ.

Here are some general suggestions for the practice of contextualised discipleship among East Asians in the diaspora:

• From the moment we first meet an international student, we need to keep the end in mind. How is what we are teaching and modeling preparing this student for returning to East Asia?

• While teaching the Bible we need to emphasise practical application, both for current as well as future contexts. This should be done, however, with a high degree of cultural understanding, as appropriate applications may vary depending on the cultural and social contexts. An ongoing dialogue with East Asian disciples is recommended. How would they, as cultural insiders, appropriately express the values being taught in Scripture within their family setting back home? In the workplace? In the church? We do not want to be overly prescriptive, but rather help our disciples to develop skills in applying Scripture in daily life, wherever they may be.

• Since much of this is anticipatory, however, it may feel a bit unreal. How can we prepare our disciples for contexts that we ourselves have never seen or experienced, that we can learn about only through the person we are discipling? The difficulty is compounded by the fact that the new converts will, in many cases, not return to exactly the same contexts from which they came. Perhaps the best resource, supplementing the information provided by our disciple, is the experience of other Christian returnees. Case studies, constructed from returnee stories gathered in the home country, may be used to illustrate the kinds of conflicts that Christians are running into when they return. When studied together with relevant Bible passages, the disciple can begin to work out how he or she will respond if faced with a similar situation.

3. Encourage participation in Christian communities

The best discipling takes place in a community—a small group, a fellowship group, a church. In the community of faith new converts find multiple role models, gain from exposure to the full panoply of personalities and gifts, and learn by observing and communicating with Christians in all ages and stages of life. Here new converts can begin to serve, eventually learning to lead in various aspects of community life. By affiliating with and then belonging to a community, a new personal identity begins to form, derived from the identity of the group. Over time the convert begins to self-identify openly as a Christian in contexts beyond the community, hesitantly at first, but then with greater confidence as relationships within the community grow deeper.

What kind of Christian community, then, prepares new converts best for their return to East Asia? Here are some identifiable characteristics:

Ideally, East Asian students need a community that:

• Invites them into a hands-on, immersive experience of the living church, the body of Christ.

• Teaches directly from the Bible and applies biblical teachings to all areas of life.

• Provides opportunities for new converts to serve and to lead.

• Helps new converts to learn how to read the Bible, pray, worship, and share their faith in their own native language.

• Helps the person develop a Chinese, Japanese, or Thai, etc., Christian identity, so that they will not view Christianity as exclusively Western. We aim to produce indigenous Christians who will take Christ home without taking the West along with him!

• Maintains relational ties to churches in East Asia and can introduce converts to people in these churches when they return.

• Can help new converts appreciate the history and culture of the indigenous churches back home, so that they will understand why they are different from churches in the host country. It is also essential to help new converts learn how to recognize and avoid cults.

4. Build skills in spiritual self-care and in cultivating the spiritual life

What are the essential things that disciples must understand, believe,
5. For those who are open to further training, try to extend their stay in the host country

Many East Asian disciples have to return home before they are ready to stand on their own two feet as Christian disciples. It is often painful to see them go, knowing what lies in wait for them on the other side.

In many cases, however, this situation can be avoided by extending their stay in the host country. Students may apply to a Bible school for additional Bible training. They may enter a training or internship program in a church, or serve with an urban mission. In the UK, Friends International offers a training programme—The Reach Programme—for committed Christians in international student ministry. There may also be opportunities to serve in cross-cultural missions in other countries. Whenever it appears that our disciples could benefit from an extended stay, we should work with them to explore all of the possibilities.

Conclusion

Perhaps, as we conclude, we can take a moment to answer a common objection to pre-return preparation. We could state it in the form of an extended question: “If these East Asian students are really saved, then how can they fall away? Isn’t God able to help them persevere in their faith?”

The implication is that any human effort (such as pre-return preparation) will ultimately have little effect on whether students actually persevere after returning home. The underlying theological question is a serious one that needs to be addressed. While we cannot even begin here to explain how God’s sovereignty and human responsibility work together, we can nevertheless offer a few thoughts in defence of pre-return preparation:

- The question essentially ignores God’s use of means. Yes, God will help them to persevere in their faith, and he may decide to use pre-return preparation to do it.
- The question suggests, a bit unfairly, that pre-return preparation is motivated by a lack of trust in God’s ability to take care of his own. On the contrary, it is God’s love for the returning students that compels us to help them!

Resources for returnee ministry

Please visit https://omf.org/asia/diaspora/resources-for-returnee-ministry/
George represents many Chinese students who become Christians while studying in a Western country. He believed in Jesus after spending time in a vibrant campus ministry and attending church and a Bible study in English. A few years later, George returned to China and found it was harder than he ever imagined to keep his faith. His job requires long hours and involves corrupt practices that seem impossible to avoid. His parents are pushing him into marriage with a non-Christian woman, and even if he had any time on Sunday he can’t find a church where he feels comfortable. George is seriously thinking of giving up on the faith he found in the West.

Students who have become Christians while overseas face challenges when they return to China in the areas of family relationships, employment, and church. These challenges are so severe that it is estimated up to 80 percent of them will abandon their faith within a year of returning to China.

Cultural values and cultural distance

Why is it so hard for returnees to continue in their faith after returning home to China? I suggest that the chief cause is a conflict of cultural values that has developed because they responded to the gospel and were discipled in a Western cultural context and are unable to adapt their faith to the cultural context of China.

Culture has been described as the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes one group of people from another. Cultural distance is the difference in cultural values between two groups of people. Cultural values are acquired in childhood through a process called conditioning, which relies on positive/negative reinforcement by family and society. Children are not conscious that they are being conditioned, and what they absorb in the process is taken to be the correct, moral, and appropriate way to think and act.

I believe that the key cultural value impacting discipleship of Chinese students is the difference between individual and group orientation, also called individualism and collectivism. Chinese students who have grown up in China have spent their formative years in a group-oriented culture.

Group-oriented culture

A group-oriented culture shapes a person’s identity so that it comes from their membership and role in a group (e.g., the family, a village, or a work team). Group-oriented people sub-consciously believe their own survival and wellbeing depend on the success of their group, so individual needs are sacrificed for the benefit of the group. Group members think in terms of we and us, not in terms of I or me. Interdependence and harmony between group members are highly valued and relationship is more important than truth. Most Chinese students have grown up in closely enmeshed relationships with their family members and have learnt to cooperate with their relatives (and later with their classmates) to ensure that the group does well—ensuring success for all.

Leaving these tightly interconnected relationships to study in a foreign country is difficult for group-oriented Chinese students. The vacuum of close relationships they experience when first moving overseas is probably one of the main reasons that many of them find Christian churches and fellowships so appealing. Their need to be part of a group and connect to others makes Christian community and the gospel very attractive. Many responses to the
individual-oriented culture. Discipleship is contextualized to the surrounding culture and it is most likely that the new Chinese believer will be discipled in a Western individual-oriented context. An individually-oriented person identifies primarily with self, relating to me and I. They subconsciously believe that the needs of the individual take precedence over the needs of the group. Independence, self-reliance, and taking care of one’s self are valued. Individuals may choose to join a group but it doesn’t form part of their identity and they can easily leave the group again whenever it suits them. 

Discipleship in an individual-oriented society usually starts with the individual—me. I recognize my sin, I repent of my sin, I ask God to forgive my sin because Jesus died for me and I believe in Jesus. This is all theologically correct, but typically this is a journey the individually-oriented person makes on his or her own and then announces to family and friends. This is acceptable in an individual-oriented culture because faith/religion is considered a personal and private affair. Family and friends may mock, they may resist being proselytised themselves, but the new Christian is allowed to have his or her personal faith. 

After responding to the gospel message, new believers are discipled in how to live as a Christian. They are encouraged to attend a church and fellowship, to be generous with their resources, and to look for ways to serve their church. This is the community aspect that is often so attractive to international students. However, within this community there will be an emphasis on developing faith as an individual. As the Bible is taught and explained, it is applied to the context of a student-focused ministry in an individual-oriented society in a modern Western city. There will be an emphasis on personal holiness expressed by personal Bible reading, reflection, and prayer. They will be persuaded to stand up for the truth, even if it impacts relationships. They will be encouraged to build up their knowledge of the Bible and (Western) theology.

However, although they are encouraged to attend church and a study group, there is often limited teaching about the purpose and meaning of church. They will observe a lack of commitment by some, and the common practice of moving from church to church to find “the church that suits me.” They will experience church in a society where it is free and legal to meet. Probably very little will be said about suffering or persecution, or how to face conflicts with close family members in a way that upholds truth but honours the relationship. In a society with a Judeo-Christian heritage, “integrity in the workplace” will only receive a brief mention, not the careful nuanced discussion that is needed for the context in China where corruption is an everyday practice at all levels of employment. In the Western context where each person makes their own choice of a life partner or to remain single it is unlikely that there will be advice on how to face persistent pressure from relatives who are determined to see a suitable match that produces grandchildren. Sadly, for all the careful discipleship and mentoring, many Western ministries have prepared these international students for the wrong context.

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Three key problem areas

Typically, Chinese returnees struggle in three spheres of life when they return to China. Firstly, with family relationships. Secondly, with work and
career issues. And thirdly, settling into a church or fellowship.  

Family relationships

It is my observation that the kind of family that sends a child overseas to study is not an average family. Considering what has been said above, it is even more remarkable that group-oriented Chinese parents would choose to send their only child away from the nurture and protection of the group to a foreign land. In general, Chinese are known to have high levels of achievement motivation and it is the highly motivated parent who is willing to make tough decisions to see their child, and by extension, the family get ahead.  

Studying overseas is an expensive and difficult process that requires great tenacity and determination. The student may be unaware of the extent of the effort made on their behalf, and they are equally unaware that completing their studies overseas is not the end of their parents’ plans. On returning to China, there are further tasks that will need to be fulfilled and the high performing parents then apply their considerable organizing skills to these tasks.

Work and career

The first task of the returnee is to find appropriate employment. Up to this point, it would be easy to believe that the goal has been to help the child receive an education that facilitates a prosperous career. However, on returning home, it becomes obvious that the higher goal is not so much the success of the individual student, but the benefit and reputation of the whole family. While overseas, the returnee learnt to think of employment as something that provides financial income as well as a sense of meaning when engaged in a purposeful career. As a Christian he or she may desire to work in a way that honours God. While expecting that work will take up the majority of their time, they also expect to have time to relax and attend church events. On returning to China, they face an undersupply of appropriate jobs and an oversupply of qualified returnees. Often the only way to get a job is through family connections, and this means their work performance must be excellent to show gratitude to the employer and give face to the family. They discover that a work week can extend to fourteen hours a day, seven days a week with long commutes on crowded public transport through difficult weather and extreme pollution. They also discover that corrupt business practices are so ingrained that it is impossible to avoid taking part. To make matters worse, they receive little sympathy from those around them who accept this as a normal part of life in China. Unfortunately, the Bible teaching they received overseas often offers them little practical advice in responding to these problems.

Marriage

Once employment is established, the next challenge appears. In Confucian societies the greatest obligation of adult children is to produce the next generation—grandchildren. The obvious requirement for this is a spouse. The motivated parent is unlikely to allow matters to simply take their course and has already been planning for this critical point in life’s journey. Potential candidates are introduced, and their suitability is defined in terms of their family background, connections, employment, and financial prospects. Great tensions can develop between the returnee and their parents if he or she fails to cooperate with this process. Requests for a Christian partner are usually pushed aside as being unimportant on one hand and impossible to fulfil on the other—the parents don’t know any Christians! The family’s (group’s) future prestige and success depends on grandchildren and grandchildren come from marriage. The returnee is told that his or her desire to marry a Christian, or otherwise remain single, is selfish and endangers the welfare of the parents who have sacrificed so much for them already. The Bible teaching they received overseas (based on the assumption that choosing a life partner is a personal decision) is not of much help here. The returnee discovers that being firm and saying “no” only causes their parents to work even harder at getting them married. They also discover that in China, because of the interdependent group-oriented culture that surrounds them, they cannot simply ignore their parents—this is unacceptable in society.

Settling in a church or fellowship

The third challenge is finding a church. While discipled overseas, students were taught that it is important to meet with other believers and to be regular in church attendance. Whilst overseas they experienced church in a place where meeting is free, open, and legal. Churches were easy to find because of their obvious architecture, signage, and online presence. They were open to all and there was no need for an invitation or introduction. Churches with a student ministry excel at welcoming new people, and in the West, Chinese students are often a novelty, so they may have been cared for with overtly expressed love and practical help like lifts to church and free meals. Student ministries in Western countries are well known for high quality teaching that is interesting, intellectually stimulating, and succinct. Services usually include vibrant modern music and other interesting youth-orientated activities. All this takes place in either purpose-built church buildings or spacious air-conditioned university lecture rooms borrowed or rented for the purpose.

Simply finding a church presents a challenge to returnees. In China, official churches may be in recognizable buildings, but they are not that common in less urbanized areas and in a large city they can be hard to find.

If we recognise that the key issue comes from a clash of cultural values rather than a lack of Bible knowledge then it becomes clear that Bible teaching for Chinese students needs to be contextualised to the Chinese context. What does contextualized discipleship look like, and in what ways does it help with the problems of family relationships, work, and church?
Leaders need to recognise that many issues that are rarely mentioned in a Western Bible study are issues that a believer in China must face each day. How can we facilitate making connections so that Chinese students can fellowship and get mentored by mature Chinese Christians? How can we ensure they are being discipled as Chinese Christians who are ready to return to live in China?

if not a thousand people may attend each service. At the end of the service everyone leaves in a hurry to make room for the next service and the returnee finds it difficult to meet and talk with anyone. The returnee often finds it all but impossible to get the close fellowship they need and enjoy.

The other church option is a house-church. These groups have flourished in China even though they are technically illegal. Often, these meetings are very much out of sight and require a careful introduction by someone known and trusted by the leader before it is possible to attend. Some house-churches have leaders who were trained in local underground seminaries or overseas (the latter are returnees themselves). However, many house-churches are led by committed believers who lead, pastor, teach and minister, but have usually received very little training to do so. Returnees who are used to a vibrant overseas church, often find the sermons rambling, the theology strange, the music uninspiring, the room cramped and stuffy, and the children’s ministry non-existent.24

As an overseas student they were used to the idea of moving from church to church to find one that suited them; after returning, the few options available are much the same and moving around is viewed as unspiritual.25 In such a situation, it’s hard to connect and feel at home or build the supportive relationships that are needed to face the pressures in life. There are no more friendly lifts to church and the journey by public transport may take an hour or more. There may only be one day a week (if even that) to rest, and there is pressure from family members who expect the returnee to spend Sundays with them. Is it any wonder that many returnees struggle to establish themselves in a church and slowly stop making the effort? While overseas their church or fellowship was their main “group” providing support, relationships, and meaning to life. Now, after returning to China, life slowly reverts to the traditional groupings of family and work. Without the support of other Christians, many returnees find it impossible to live for Christ, slowly compromise to fit in with those around them, and eventually leave their faith behind, becoming yet another statistic.

What can be done?

What can be done about this situation? It is interesting that when faced with this problem some Western ministry leaders have suggested that more Bible or even seminary training might help.26 This is partially true. If we recognise that the key issue comes from a clash of cultural values rather than a lack of Bible knowledge then it becomes clear that Bible teaching for Chinese students needs to be contextualised to the Chinese context. What does contextualised discipleship look like, and in what ways does it help with the problems of family relationships, work, and church?

Using Chinese language to worship

We have already said that contextualized discipleship requires discipling the student as a Chinese Christian in order to live in China. The first simple step is to encourage them to use Chinese language in their worship and learning about God. It may seem obvious that reading the Chinese Bible, praying in Chinese, and talking about matters of faith in Chinese would be helpful. However, for various reasons there is a great deal of pushback on this. Many Chinese became Christians in an English language campus ministry, with improving their English as a bonus attraction. The most commonly used Union Version Chinese Bible uses archaic Chinese that is difficult to understand, unlike modern English translations, which are in everyday English.27 Western ministry leaders often accept that students will use the version they like and understand (i.e., an English version), rather than encourage them to also persevere with learning to understand the Chinese version. Prayer is modelled in “easy English” which is the language used in mixed-group international ministries. Several students, after making trips home to China, have shared with me their frustration of being unable to explain to their parents what has happened to them after becoming Christians. Since the whole experience was in English they did not have the Chinese words to explain it.

Applying Bible teaching to the Chinese context

At a deeper level, these students need to be encouraged to consider how to apply the Bible’s teaching to life in China, such as: What does the Bible say about honouring your parents when they are non-Christians and expect you to do things that violate God’s law? What does the Bible say about eating blood or food sacrificed to idols and how do you apply this in a situation where these things are common practice?28 Leaders need to recognise that many issues that are rarely mentioned in a Western Bible study are issues that a believer in China must face each day. How can we facilitate making connections so that Chinese students can fellowship and get mentored by mature Chinese Christians? How can we ensure they are being discipled as Chinese Christians who are ready to return to live in China?

Preparing them to return

Students need to learn about the issues they are going to face at home before they return so they have an opportunity to prepare themselves. These are complex issues with no easy answers, but prayerful thought and discussion beforehand can help set realistic expectations and strategies. Introductions to churches and returnee networks can assist returnees in connecting to a church or fellowship that is committed to seeing returnees settle well. These questions indicate the need for specialist knowledge and skills that are often
beyond the scope of traditional student ministry teams. OMF’s Diaspora Returnee Ministry team make a unique contribution by partnering with other churches and ministries to facilitate discipleship for the Chinese context, to provide specialised pre-return training, and to help connect returnees with churches and fellowships through networks in China.

Chinese returnees like George who have become Christians while overseas typically face severe challenges when they return home. There are tensions with parents and employers, as well as difficulties in finding and settling into a church. However, understanding that these issues arise from a clash of cultural values suggests that discipling Chinese students with the Chinese context in mind, giving them some pre-return training, and connecting them with a returnee network that will help them find an appropriate church will make a crucial difference for returnees like George. MRT

Theologising Migration: Otherness and Liminality in East Asia
Regnum Studies in Mission

This book weaves a rich tapestry of historical, sociological, anthropological, biblical and philosophical portraits of migration focusing on East Asia, with a robust theological and missiological response and accompanied by an extensive literature review. Of excellent scholarship, the book is infused with a persuasive exhortation to God’s community as a missional entity to fulfill its obligation to obey the “alien mandate” – to love the Lord our God and to love the migrant as ourselves. Dr Woods’ book is particularly relevant in today’s context of an unprecedented global migration phenomenon which provides many open doors for God’s community to share the good news of Jesus. As this is faithfully done, migrants may come to believe and belong as they are delivered from spiritual and physical bondage. This is a book that will deeply challenge both our minds and our hearts and should spur us into action.

Rev. Dr Patrick Fang, General Director, OMF International
Aki stepped through the door to Dublin Japanese Christian Fellowship one Sunday afternoon. Most non-Christians who come for the first time are shy and hesitant but Aki brightly announced to me, “I have already been to worship today. I was walking down Temple Bar and a missionary invited me in.” She used the Japanese word for worship, but awkwardly, as if she were not used to it. For missionary she switched to English. I nodded my acceptance with the non-committal, “Ah so desuka” to which she added, “They gave me a book.” She pulled it out of her handbag; thick and leather bound, it opened to double vertical columns of Japanese with chapters and verses marked with numbers. She closed it again to show me the cover with a gold embossed title in Japanese: The Book of Mormon. “Well done for going,” I replied, “would you like a cup of tea?”

There are as many as 1500 Japanese in Dublin. This is the largest number of Japanese in the UK and Ireland living outside of London. Kaori came to a Bible study within twenty-four hours of arriving. She is the daughter of the pastor whose church we attended while at Japanese language school in Sapporo from 1993 to 1995. Her father dedicated our daughter Kathryn. Saori grew up two train stations from Ichikawa where the OMF Japan office is. Machiko grew up where we lived when pastoring OMF The Chapel of Adoration in Ichikawa. She hopes to go to the Chapel when she returns. I found out Aki came from Western Japan; she was lively and outgoing. Risa is from Kyushu and while in Dublin spent three months on an internship in the Czech Republic. I introduced her to a Japanese pastor there with whom she continued to study the Bible. Ena was from Okinawa, a place I have always wanted to visit.

One of the first questions we ask is, where are you from in Japan? Having lived in three different areas of Japan, this question often provides a connection. Or maybe we have had others from that area come to the Dublin Japanese Christian Fellowship.

I grew up in Yorkshire. I studied and got my first job in Oxford, worked in Japan for twenty years and now live in Northern Ireland. Even if you are not from the UK you probably appreciate some of the differences in culture between these places, often marked by accent and attitude.

In Japan too there are variations according to region. Those from Western Japan can be more expressive, open, informal, and chatty. Those from Tokyo tend to be more reserved, more formal, and polite. Those from country areas are more conservative. City
folk make relationships more quickly (but not quickly). There are variations in accent. And there are plenty of exceptions to all these types. Everyone who steps through the door of Dublin Japanese Christian Fellowship—or wherever you meet them—is an individual with his or her own personality, background, joys, troubles, hopes, and fears. However, there are (at least) three dynamics that shape Japanese people and influence their behaviour wherever they come from. They are: Group Identity, Deference, and Shame.

**Group Identity**

In many meetings, in a host of different Japanese cultural settings, a common phrase used by Japanese is, *Wareware sannin jin wa*. It is a self-reference, “we Japanese”, to explain the why of what they do. We Japanese are Buddhist. We Japanese go to Shinto temples. We Japanese don’t push ourselves forward. To Western-influenced ears this may seem an insufficient reason for a particular act. For Japanese, though, doing something because everybody else does it provides a deep-rooted motivation for action. It is foundational for Japanese living, for maintaining harmony in relationships, and for preserving their sense of identity as Japanese.

If you approach the subject of Christianity in Japan, you will frequently receive the reply, we Japanese are Buddhist. There is no rudeness here. It is like me saying I live in Tokyo and receiving the reply, we live in Osaka. It is not an issue of personal conviction but of group identity. The implication is that it is fine for you to be a Christian, simply that we Japanese are not. We Japanese are Buddhist.

Such a statement is made more complicated by the fact that few Japanese know the four noble truths of Buddhism; fewer still follow the eightfold path. When they say they’re Buddhist, they usually mean a family funeral will be taken by the Buddhist priest who will come and deal with the death in a professional manner by chanting in Sanskrit. Using the Buddhist sect the family has always used is more important than the religious content of the ceremony. Group identity surfaces again.

At birth Japanese take their babies to the Shinto Shrine. They take their new car there too, to have it purified, kept safe, protected. As pastor of a church, I was asked to conduct car blessings too, and did. Kids are dressed up in traditional costumes and taken to a shrine at three and seven or just once at five if you are a girl. Everyone does it because everyone does it. If you do not do it as everyone else does it, there is an odd fear that if something bad happens, you might be blamed.

Many weddings are white weddings, held in a church-y sort of room, with a cross at the front, and a foreign man dressed as a minister-like person. Again, there is not a lot of concern about content but rather a desire to follow popular fashion.

Japanese society is a group society. It may be so more deeply than most others because of the many years of self-imposed separation and isolation from the rest of the world from the 1630s to the 1850s. This period distilled the cultural values of that day; values which persist despite the present, modern-day façade. It is particularly noticeable in the rigorous adherence to ceremony and ritual. There is death ceremony, indeed, many post-death ceremonies. At school there are all sorts of assemblies. In our children’s local primary school there was a pool opening ceremony during the summer term. Everyone was there. Everyone participated. The words read at the pool opening ceremony were the same every year. Within this highly choreographed structure Japanese find an ease, and a place, a group-belonging, an identity.

I am often asked, what religion are the Japanese? I usually reply, a touch provocatively, being Japanese. To Japanese being Japanese means doing what Japanese do. This applies to being a family member, a company member, or a member of the class that graduated in 2004. Such group ties are felt strongly. It is the preservation of these meaning-giving ties that lies behind the second and third influences of deference and shame.

**Deference**

Many of you will be familiar with the Japanese suffix *-san* placed after people’s names. It is often (wrongly) thought to be equivalent to Mr, Mrs, Ms, or Miss. The suffix serves a more important function than indicating gender or marital status. It indicates that I consider you above me. You cannot, therefore, use it to refer to yourself. Only others can use it to refer to you. For children there are alternative suffixes, but you can’t use them for your own kids. Between kids, you only use it for those older than you.

For someone more respected still and when addressing letters, other suffixes come into use. As a church leader in Japan I also received a suffix. I was *-sensei*. Literally, one who has lived life a little longer. My given name, Graham, was never used, but sometimes I was Orr-sensei. However, most of the time sentences simply began, “Sensei…” Since Japanese don’t use the word “you”, but rather a name and honorific suffix, even in direct conversation with a person, you have to know people’s names and status to be able to talk to them.

As deference is shown, verbs change and verb endings change. There are subtleties on subtleties. I could go on and on. My point is that Japanese show everyone the appropriate level of respect in everything they do from how they are addressed, to grammar changes, to the length and depth of each bow.

Just in case we think this is easy and automatic for them, the following incident shows otherwise. My daughter Kathryn had a Japanese friend stay with us over Christmas. Her English was excellent, her German even better. I tried many times to switch into Japanese with her. She never wavered in using English. On the third day I said something about using Japanese and she replied, “Yes, but how polite do I need to be with you?” I had made constant comments that she was just part of the family while she was staying with us, but that left her unsure of what to call me if we used Japanese. In English I was just Graham. In Japanese would I be Graham-san, or Orr-san, or Orr-sensei?

If you ask any Japanese person what causes them the most trouble and stress in life, you will receive a uniform answer: human relationships. I have highlighted one small area. Deference is required in all relationships, and it extends to all areas of life from pouring drinks of water at a meal table to what
time you are allowed to leave the office after work. If a person at school, work, or church is a year older than you, it is their opinion that has priority. Yours is best left unmentioned. You do whatever someone above you requests. You do it humbly, without questioning. And you have the security of knowing that the person above you will take responsibility for you. Showing deference in all situations can be quite tricky.

Shame

When Aki walked in to the Dublin Japanese Christian Fellowship, I wanted her to feel welcome, to feel like she was part of the group. We usually drink tea and chat for the first thirty minutes or so, welcoming newcomers, and catching up with recent news with others. When Aki arrived I didn’t launch into anything negative about Mormonism. Indeed, I actually praised her willingness to go. She had come to us showing the same openness. Any anti-Mormon comments would have made her feel she had done something this Christian group she was presently attending would not approve of. That feeling of shame would make her feel much less accepted by us. Instead of telling her what I thought was right or wrong, we simply welcomed her to join us and watch. She saw how we related to each other. She saw how we read the Bible passage and discussed it openly, warmly, and relevantly together for an hour. All that time she would have been assessing whether this was a group to which she would like to belong. The parameters for that decision would be the quality of the inter-personal relationships more than the content of the study. Afterwards, over more tea, I gently added a sentence or two explaining that Mormonism is not considered part of the historical Christian church. Even in saying that I smoothed it over with it’s fine if you want to go there, and set the whole conversation in a wider context of explaining church denominations in Ireland. It was deliberately indirect.

Aki came back the next month, began to attend the Bible studies between monthly meetings and visited us in Northern Ireland for a few days as well. She became a fully-involved and greatly-appreciated member of the group. She never went back to the Mormons, though I do wonder what she did with the book. I don’t ask of course because that would probably embarrass her.

My task in welcoming her was to show deference to her for her actions without necessarily condoning the actions themselves. At some point during the year, she must have worked out for herself the rights and wrongs of going to Mormon services and because it was all handled indirectly she did not lose face and could enjoy being part of Dublin Japanese Christian Fellowship.

It may seem to western-influenced minds that Japanese avoid dealing with issues when in actual fact they are choosing to deal with them indirectly and invisibly to save public face. When I first lived in Japan, I was hired by a language school in Sendai that made out my contract on two sheets of paper. At the regional immigration office the school’s business manager submitted the top page that fulfilled immigration requirements and omitted the second sheet that did not comply with requirements. I saw what I thought was going on and told the immigration officer it was a lie. I was a young, naïve Westerner who didn’t understand what was going on! I caused the business manager huge embarrassment when all he was trying to do was to help me get a job. In retrospect I can see that the business manager was showing deference to required form and both he and the immigration officer would have known what was going on indirectly but neither could say without causing shame to both sides, embarrassment, and a breakdown in relations.

Deferece is shown in all public relations to preserve the harmony of the group, while the underlying private communications are surmised, discerned, and guessed at but never mentioned. When these unspoken codes of conduct are not followed, relationships break and cannot be mended. If someone is found to be involved in a financial scandal at a company, they resign. They remove themselves from the group in shame for having let the company down publicly, and the whole group feels shame that one of their group has been found out publicly. Often the boss also resigns in order to take responsibility for the group’s shame.

All is well as long as the public face is preserved. No one thinks financial mismanagement is not actually happening. The problem, and the accompanying shame, only arises when it comes out and public face is damaged. How do these dynamics influence Japanese when they travel and live abroad?

Japanese Abroad

In my own context of the UK and Ireland, most Japanese who come to Dublin Japanese Christian Fellowship are on working holiday visas for one year. They are mostly women in their late twenties. In addition, there are two or three families on business and one or two undergraduates. Each has different reasons for being abroad, but a common one we hear is exhaustion and fatigue from an over-choreographed, conformist lifestyle. Aki had been working from 7:00 AM to 12:00 PM every day, seven days a week, as a primary school teacher and was worn out. She wanted to escape for a while to recover and reconsider her career choices. Some are asking deeper questions—what is life about? Who should I marry? What does the future hold?

We have found these young Japanese living abroad to be more open to Christian influence than their contemporaries in Tokyo, but not to a rushed “four spiritual laws” type of approach. The key reason for such openness is their loss of identity. They are no longer part of a group, not among a large number of fellow Japanese, not among their school friends or workmates. They are dislocated from their normal way of obtaining and maintaining their identity. After settling in for a few months, this cultural lost-ness provides them an opportunity to learn. They begin to ask, where do I belong?

The first consequence of this cultural dynamic of group identity is that Japanese abroad are very eager to belong to a group, as Aki’s story well illustrates. The Japanese pastor who trained me explained that for Japanese belonging precedes believing. I disagreed strongly at the time, but have found it invariably to be true. Japanese case themselves into a group slowly, with care. Once they feel part of the group, accepted, and secure, they are able to explore deeper issues such as what is true while being supported by
the new relationships they have built.

The second consequence of these dynamics when Japanese live abroad is that they will defer to your opinion for the sake of your friendship and membership in your circle of friends. When abroad, Japanese are loosened, to a degree, from the groupthink ties of their culture, but they do not cease to be Japanese. They will show you respect and defer to your opinions, especially if you are older than they are. They will rarely say “no”, and “yes” denotes a nodding participation in the conversation, not wholehearted agreement.

In my first position as staff in a large Japanese church, with still very limited language, I had to answer the church telephone. My side of the conversation would be: “Hai,” “Hai”, “Hai” ten or fifteen times, with bows (yes, even on the telephone). I would put the phone down but have no idea who called, what they wanted, or even who to tell about it. *Hai* is a versatile response, sometimes meaning I am on the other end of this conversation, sometimes I get what you are saying (though I don’t necessarily agree), and sometimes it can mean “yes, I agree with you.” It all depends on how you say it. It is a much broader and neutral response than an English “yes”.

Once or twice a year I find an email in my inbox saying how in some UK city church, four or five Japanese have believed and asking what should the church do? While I delight in local churches having such contact with Japanese, I have first to peel back the layers of what has gone on and usually find that in answer to the major questions of belief such as, “Do you believe Jesus is the Son of God? Do you believe he died for your sins?” Japanese have answered, “yes” (thinking it an English equivalent to *hai*) because they want to belong and want on-going friendship and do not want to upset kind and generous hosts. My advice to delighted Bible study leaders and pastors is “Don’t take ‘yes’ for an answer.”

In the first few months abroad Japanese are disoriented and respond warmly to friendship and encouragement. Welcome them to your circle of friends. Since UK culture is less expectation laden than Japanese, and Irish culture expects even less, Japanese find an increased sense of freedom. Unfortunately, it is a sense of freedom that will hunt them down when they return home.

**Returning to Japan**

Every one of those on working holiday visas in Dublin will return to Japan. Undergraduates too. Businessmen too. They may be abroad a year, or two, or maybe as long as five, but almost every single person returns to Japan. And has a shock.

While working in OMF The Chapel of Adoration we learnt that Japanese come to faith in Christ in quite large numbers when abroad. As many as a quarter of church members were returnees. But three in four of those Japanese who have become Christians abroad struggle to keep their faith on return. There are many reasons: inadequate understanding of what it means to become a Christian out of deference to over-eager preachers, a lack of discipleship in local churches, and unfamiliarity with Japanese Christian language. However, the most common (and tragic) reason is simply being unaware of how difficult and different Japan will feel on their return.

Their freedom from the requirements of Japanese cultural groupthink is often central to their finding a new identity and faith in Jesus, baptism, and membership in a church. On returning to Japan they are dislocated (again) from this new group and struggle to relocate themselves in the Japanese church. They expect it to be just like the church they have come to know abroad, which it rarely is. Their experience away, the lessons they have learnt, and the new values they have adopted are often contrary to Japanese expectations (even church expectations!) and when they live out their foreign-learnt values at work and in church, they find themselves behaving very differently from their colleagues. By not showing deference to those around them, by not fitting in, returnees quickly find themselves outside of the group, with its accompanying shame.

To avoid such mishaps, we take time to prepare those returning and try to help those who work with Japanese in other cities to do the same. Without such preparation, Japanese get back home and find they don’t belong in the culture, and even more shockingly to them, they don’t belong in the church either. This is a complex issue with which to grapple. I have found material published by Friends International UK to be well written and universally helpful. In particular the booklet, *Think Home* and their Bible discussions for international students, *The ID Course*. I have translated the latter into Japanese to allow those working with international students across the UK to use it in conjunction with the English version.

Aki returned to Japan in January wanting to be involved in educational reform but didn’t take up an offer to work at her former primary school. In May I came home from a conference to find Aki was staying with us overnight. She had come back to Ireland for a week and travelled up to see us. She said she missed speaking English, had found Irish people so friendly, and that she wanted to come back to Dublin—which she called her second home. She has been granted another working holiday visa, this time for Denmark, where she hopes to do further study. In July, to everyone’s delight, she appeared again in Dublin, for a week this time, accompanied by her mother. She is, however, showing signs that she is struggling to settle back into life in Japan.

Will her continued search for identity and significance lead her to a lasting relationship with Christ and an assurance that she is an integral part of God’s people? Will local Christians and overseas Japanese Christians and Japanese Christians at home welcome her and include her in their circle until she discovers she is a part of it? Will her unspoken questions about group identity be supplemented by questions about her identity before her Creator and what he has done through Jesus? It may well be that God is using her overseas experience to extend his love to her so that she will find a lasting identity. With great hope that God is leading many out of their native cultural setting so they can find him, we work to lead Japanese to faith in Jesus, disciple them in Christian truth, prepare them to return home as changed individuals, encourage them to integrate into a church upon their return, and to make an impact there as witnesses for Christ.

*MRT*
or much of my life I have thought about the desires mentioned in Psalm 34:7—“Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” It seems clear that some of my desires were given to me even though I might have only expressed them to a friend and had never really asked the Lord for them. Other desires took a long time to come even after many years of praying. But there have also been desires that were clearly put into my heart and mind by the Lord. One such desire is the desire to care for those we often refer to as the strangers, foreigners, or sojourners in our land.

The Lord reveals his heart towards the foreigner in Deuteronomy 18:18–19 where we read that, “He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt.” God further instructs the Israelites how to behave towards the strangers in their land in Leviticus 19:9–10, 33–34.

When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the LORD your God. … When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not ill-treat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.”

These verses are only a small sample of the passages that show God’s heart for those who are away from their home country, living in a strange land. He instructs his people to love them for two simple reasons. Firstly, because he loves them his people should reflect his character. And secondly, because the Israelites were once strangers in a foreign land, they know what it feels like.

This heart for the stranger is something that the Lord at many times placed in my heart along with opportunities to work with him and others to love those who were living as strangers in my land.

I became a Christian at a young age and not long afterwards felt that God was calling me to work in China. He placed in my heart a concern for people who lived far away in a strange land, a desire that they should know the good news about Jesus and be able to call out to him and be saved. In my late teens the Lord gave me the desire to pray and I was able to join a group of people who kept themselves informed and prayed for Christian workers in Asian countries, including China. That was in the 70s when the possibility of living and working in China was still unimaginable.

On going up to University in Belfast, Northern Ireland in 1980, I found that students from many of the Asian countries I had been praying for were studying there. I was challenged and also excited. How could I pray for these countries and not get involved with those who were around me from these places? On my floor in halls lived some Hong Kong medical students who I quickly got to know and had great fun hanging out with. I joined a group of students from the Christian Union who with folk from local churches organised events to pray for the nations they came from.

Claire McConnell

Claire is the Archivist at the OMF International Center in Singapore. Before coming to Asia she taught mathematics and science in a Northern Ireland grammar school. She has enjoyed introducing many international students to her wee part of the world. She loves hiking—especially in the mountains or on the beach—and gardening.
events especially for international students—“The International Friendship Association.” So during my four years at university I enjoyed the richness of living with and getting to know many Chinese and other Asian students. It was a great time to learn about their cultures, families, hopes and fears, and to eat and cook great food together.

As we shared the same joys and struggles of life as students, it was natural to share my life with Jesus with these friends whether they were believers or not. A number attended my wedding. My university experience was my first real opportunity to meet and get to know people from other countries and I learned that they were just like me in many ways but also different from me. I also learned that just as people from my home country could be very different from each other, the same was true with people from other places. One further lesson was the advantages of pooling student and church resources. As students, we were living and working together, so it was natural for us to do things together and to invite our international student friends along to events. The folk from the churches had resources, cars, church halls, and friends to help with catering. They were often older and wiser and able to give us younger, enthusiastic students good advice. We, as students, were usually only there for three years. They brought continuity to a constantly changing student population. And the students enjoyed getting to know these locals and spending time with real families.

After leaving university, I married and went to live on the north coast of Northern Ireland. For health reasons the door to Asia was closed to my husband and I but we continued to pray for Asian countries. Paul and I were both teachers and his school had a boarding department with pupils from Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, and elsewhere. So we were able to support young people far from home.

One young Japanese boy, in particular, stands out as he brought us a missionary from Japan, to help him with his English. Eva was able to mentor him and share her faith. He was able to share his struggles with her in his own language. He frequently joined us for meals and Christmas family gatherings. When he went to university in London it was natural for him to join the student programmes at the church where Eva had served after retiring. There he found faith and a wife! It was a joy to meet his father, mother, and aunt, who, when their son got married in England after graduating from university, came over to Northern Ireland especially to visit us. We felt we had done little, but for them it was good to know that someone had cared for and helped their son so far from home. This experience showed me the benefits of working closely with someone who understood the culture and language of international students and the importance of linking young people with Christians who live in their new setting. It was wonderful to see how God built on what he had begun in a small way through us.

Looking back on my life, I can often see that God closes and opens doors for different kinds of service during different times and seasons. When the educational environment in Asia changed and fewer students came to board at our local school the school decided to close the boarding department. Thus another time of rich opportunities to interact with Asians came to an end.

Of course the opportunity to pray for and support others working with Asians never closes. And through this time we continued to pray for OMF and for our friend David Strachan who was working with international students in Belfast through International Student Christian Services. One day David phoned to say that he had met a student from China who was moving to our town to study for a PhD. He gave me her address in halls and told me I was to go and visit her. Anyone who remembers David knows that when he asked you to do something you did it. I can still feel the nervousness I had when I stood outside the door in halls. What would I say? How would she react to me? But that was the start of a number of years of working with PhD students from China and their families at our local university.

And so in the 90s, our home became a place for these students and families to gather, to eat and, to have fun, with everyone bringing different Chinese dishes. When newcomers from China arrived at the university, they were brought along to the next gathering at our home. Picnics, barbecues (often in the rain), and making jiao zi (with flour everywhere), highlighted the great times of fun and sharing life together. As I was at home caring for a young family, I had time to meet up with the spouses of the students to help them improve their English and later to study the Bible together. Each year we organised a Christmas party and dinner with all the traditional games and food. We invited our friends back on study leave from Taiwan to come up to our town and share the meaning of Christmas in Mandarin with our Chinese friends. The Christmas “Nine Lessons and Carols” service at church was also a great opportunity to share the good news as we followed the readings and sang the carols together. I realised just
how helpful it was to have a printed liturgy or readings for those with English as a second language. It was also a joy when some of the families started to organise their own events and invite us along. From the beginning, God provided like-minded Christians from our church and other churches in the area who enjoyed having the Chinese families to their homes, helping to cook the Christmas dinners, and organising other events. This was something God was doing and we were just doing our part—together.

But more changes were coming. As I went in and out of the university I began to notice that the PhD students from China were not the only strangers. There were more and more undergraduate students arriving from Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, USA, Canada, Europe, China, etc. I felt a strong pressure from the Lord that we were to care and reach out to these strangers too. To be honest I was a bit overwhelmed at this prospect and not sure how it would all fit together. However one by one the people we had been working with began to graduate and move to other parts of the UK or Canada, return to China, or simply get jobs in the area. And so, as that opportunity began to fade, this new opportunity to reach out to a much wider group of students began to grow.

It was instantly clear that this job was too big for one church or family to organise, we could not do this alone, and God provided the people needed to establish the new ministry. He first provided a friend who worked at the university and was prepared to put the time and effort needed to get things started. The idea was to work alongside the university International Office to link hosts from local churches to students who wanted to join the programme. We would match one or more students to a local family, couple (retired couples or “empty nesters” make great hosts), or individual and then they could work out together how often they would like to meet.

I have always felt that bringing a young person into your home is both a privilege and a great responsibility as it puts them in a very vulnerable position. So from the beginning we were careful not to use this as an opportunity to preach or pressure the young person in any way. That is one reason I preferred to send the students in twos or threes so they might not feel so isolated and it was also easier for hosts to interact with a couple of students as one student might be quieter than the others or not have such a good grasp of English.

We called ourselves “International Friends” as our desire was to provide opportunities for local people and students to become friends. Over the years many friendships have formed, extending to the families of students. Often host families were invited to graduations, sometimes to represent the student’s family who could not be present. After graduating and returning home, many students have come back to visit their hosts and hosts have gone to visit the students in their home country.

While hosts were told to be careful not to put pressure on students, the students often asked about their hosts’ motivation for taking part in the programme and about their faith. Many asked to go along to church with their hosts. Events were organised so that the students and hosts could get together to visit local landmarks, take part in traditional Irish dancing—a Ceilidh—on St. Patrick’s Day, and enjoy a Christmas dinner together. This dinner was provided by a local business through their Christian ministry. At some of these gatherings we would have Christian presentations but always made it clear when inviting the students that this would be part of the programme.

We built a close and wonderful relationship with the people in the university International Office who invited us to share at the induction meetings for new students twice a year to explain the programme. We also joined some of the induction events. In the early days, before it was possible to sign up online, they put our registration cards into the student welcome packs and helped to collect and pass these on to us.

I write as “we” because from the beginning this was a joint venture between many churches in the area. One church could not sustain the number of hosts needed, as more than 190 students registered some years. Nor could one person undertake all the administration needed to match students with hosts, recruit new hosts, and organise events. Thus a group was formed with members from the different churches to share out all the work and to pray together. One major benefit of this cooperation was that the programme was not dependent on one person’s vision, or one church’s resources—a reality that has brought stability and continuity until today.

Looking back, and at the time, I was certain that this was something that God had brought into being. He opened the doors at the university, he prompted the students and hosts to join the scheme, he gave the resources needed financially and in all the other ways. He gave us the opportunity to love the stranger and he grew that love in our hearts. So many hosts have testified to the joy they have had in getting to know these young people. Many of the students’ parents have thanked the hosts for giving their children a home far from home, and for being there for them during sickness or other difficult times. God has used these to bring some to know him or to open their hearts and desire to know more about him.

With the changing needs of a family growing up I went back to teaching full time and had to move away from direct participation in the organising group, a difficult and painful decision. After a number of years of normal family life my husband Paul died suddenly while we were on a family holiday. And just less than two years later I married Walter who had worked as a missionary in Taiwan. It was he and his wife Karen who had come to help us with our Chinese students. Karen had also died suddenly, about six months after Paul.

After we got married, Walter and his girls moved to Northern Ireland and a couple of years later he served as one of the pastors of the Belfast Chinese Christian Church. This church was very keen to reach out to Chinese students at the university and often had students come to their services which were held in English, Mandarin, and Cantonese. We helped to organise outings to local places of interest, Walter taught English and the Bible, and of course we put on a Christmas dinner. It was here that I really saw the importance of helping students to integrate their new Christian belief with their home language and culture.
This was powerfully brought home to us one day when we gave a young student a lift from our home town to visit the Chinese church for the first time. She had joined the International Friends programme and had become a Christian through her host’s church. But in our conversation that morning she made a very shocking statement: “I want to do my Christianity in English. I don’t want it to be contaminated by my own language because that is contaminated by my home culture.”

Not sure if we had really understood her meaning, we asked some questions and she explained, with examples, the negative feeling she sometimes got from reading the Bible in her own language. The words conjured up pictures in her own mind which distorted the meaning she got from reading them in English. We knew that this would be a problem when she eventually went back home and that she was clearly oblivious to the cultural overtones in the context in which she had heard the good news. It would be important for her to learn and study the Bible in her own language, and experience church life more fully in a context closer to that which she would find when she went home. Otherwise the gap would be very difficult to cross. At that point she neither saw this need for herself nor wanted to make the move, even occasionally, to a Chinese church. She enjoyed the local church and, understandably, wanted to stay there.

Our friend’s situation revealed a real tension between the desires that some international students have and some other needs they have but may not be aware of. On the one hand, they often prefer to meet up with Northern Irish families, improve their English, learn about the local culture, and visit local places of interest. This is good. And it is also good and often easier for local churches to reach out to and engage with students. But on the other hand, students who have become Christians need to prepare for the time when they will return home so that they can more easily fit into the churches that are there. It is therefore essential that local churches and ethnic churches work together. Chinese and other ethnic churches know and understand the culture and language and can support local churches by effectively communicating the Christian message and preparing students to enter the church cultures in their home countries.

Reflecting back over my experiences through the years I can see that God uses many people in many different ways to reveal his heart of love to these strangers who have come to a foreign land. Christian students, whether in their home country or as international students themselves, can share their lives and their faith in a natural way with their fellow students. Church members can open their homes and lives to students and others who are strangers living among them. You do not have to be an expert in the stranger’s culture or language to show love, and it is fun learning about their culture first hand from your new friends. Simply sharing real life with its joys and struggles and openly showing how Jesus walks with you through these is a powerful testimony to our living Lord. Many of these folk will have come with all sorts of preconceptions about the Christian faith and God, whether positive or negative. Others will have absolutely no thoughts about these things at all. All need to see faith—real and alive—in our lives. And that takes time.

Walking with foreigners can bring great joy, but it can also become a painful journey at times, particularly as we see dear friends return home, whether they have come to faith or not. And at the end of the day, some of our friends will embrace the gospel, some reject it, some misunderstand it, and others simply ignore it. After all, these were the types of responses Jesus got. Their response, however, is not our responsibility. Our part is to delight in the God who loves the stranger and desires people from every nation to love him and faithfully share that love with them.

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home. His examination of the way group identity, reference, and shame shape their responses to the world and how their adopted culture modifies this outlook helps us to understand Japanese friends. It also gives direction on helping them adjust to life away from home and face the prospect of return.

Loving the stranger begins with loving the God who loves the stranger. This reality moved Claire McConnell to care for the “International Friends” she met in university and provided her with motivation to continue to do so for many years. Her account of how a lay person can delight in the Lord’s love by loving the stranger will encourage others to do the same.

Only as we get to know the strangers in our midst can they become our friends. And only as we share Christ with them can they become, not strangers and aliens, but family members. We offer these articles with this aim in mind.

3 It is possible that its use in 1 Peter 1:1 includes Christians. See Peter H. Davids, The First Epistle of Peter, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 46, who understands the diaspora here in the spiritual sense of those who are living outside the heavenly city. The three NT usages of the verb form in Acts refer to the scattering of Jewish Christians due to persecution.


Reviewed by Walter McConnell

One always picks up a book by Sunquist expecting to learn new and sometimes unexpected things, and this is certainly true of his new book. While it begins with a broad-brush overview of church history that is anything but new, the narrative quickly develops to demonstrate that even though Christianity at the beginning of the 20th century appeared to some to be against the ropes, its surprising growth outside the confines of the once-considered Christian West have both revitalized and transformed it so that it has become a truly global faith.

As always, Sunquist challenges many of us to think outside of our evangelical boxes and learn about and from the Roman Catholic, orthodox, ecumenical, and what he calls spiritual traditions. By highlighting the breadth of Christianity and acquainting us with what God is doing throughout the world, he also releases us from our often narrow focus on the country we work in or the people we work with. Though broadening, his analysis will cause many to cringe as some people and movements mentioned are on the fringe of Christianity and others, at least from a Nicene perspective, are patently sub-Christian. This should not dissuade readers from delving into the book, as the existence and forms of heterodoxy gives us pause to consider how the gospel should be rightly preached and disciples rightly made to prevent other aberrant varieties developing.

From the perspective of the topic of our current issue of Mission Round Table, Sunquist makes significant references to the impact the migration of peoples around the world, whether from war or famine or religious persecution, has made on the spread of the gospel. His account underlines both the movement of Christians who continue to practice their faith in a new environment and others who move into areas where they can, often for the first time, hear and respond to the gospel.

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