

Introduction

Before leaving this earth to ascend back to the Father, Jesus commissioned his followers to go and make disciples of all the nations (Matthew 28:18-19). The Greek phrase for *all the nations* is *panta ta éthnē*, which could also be translated *all ethnic groups*. The story of what God has done for humanity through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is to be told among every ethnic group in the world. The sacrifice has been for all people. The story is to be told to all people.

Challenges

Over the centuries, the church has tried to be faithful in carrying out the Great Commission. Missionaries have traversed the earth to tell the story of Jesus. Many people have heard the story and responded, accepting God's offer of mercy and grace. But there are still many people who have yet to hear the story of Jesus told in a culturally appropriate way. From a missions perspective, there is still a lot of work to do. Global population stands at 6.5 billion. Of those 6.5 billion, 2.1 billion identify themselves as Christians (Barrett, Johnson, Crossing 2006). A good number of the 4 plus billion people who are not Christians are Muslims. Many are Hindus. Many of them have no religion at all. Most Chinese, for example, are simply non-religious. Those 4 billion people, whether they have existing religious affiliations or not, need to hear about God's offer of grace and mercy through Jesus Christ. There is still a lot of mission work to be done.

One of the challenges of telling the story of Jesus to the 4 billion people who are not yet Christians is that in many of the countries where those people live Christian missionaries are not welcome. In many places, Satan has made it extremely difficult for Jesus' followers to tell his story. Even in countries where a missionary presence is not illegal, living in those countries as a missionary presents many challenges, so many in fact, that those taking up the call to foreign missions has dropped dramatically. Fewer Christians are making long-term commitments to foreign missions. There is not only a lot of work to be done, it is getting harder to do and fewer believers are stepping up volunteering to go.

Opportunities

God is always at work in his world, creating opportunities for his people to do what he has asked them to do. At this point in history an amazing thing is happening: people from all over the world are immigrating to America in astonishing numbers. People from nearly every culture on the planet are pouring into the United States at rates that are unprecedented in recent history. And while some people see the present level of immigration creating serious social and economic challenges, should not God's people see this as an opportunity?

At present, there are 193 countries recognized as sovereign nations. In any given decade that number may change by two or three in either direction as geopolitical regions

are reapportioned. But for the foreseeable future humankind is likely to remain divided into fewer than 200 countries. However, there are nearly 7,000 cultures in the world. There are 6,912 recognized language groups. Each language group constitutes a separate culture. But some cultural groups share the same language even though they are separate cultures. For instance, there are 22 cultures that utilize the Spanish language. So there are more cultures than there are language groups.

There are fewer than 200 countries, but nearly 7,000 cultures in the world. Many countries (in the geopolitical sense) are home to more than one cultural group. For instance, Nigeria, West Africa, is home to nearly 250 different cultural groups. China's population represents over 52 different linguistic and cultural groups.

Some of those 6,912 language groups are small indigenous groups of people in developing world countries and do not represent a major world population group. Statistically they are lumped into one of the 193 countries that make up our present global community. Regardless of how those people are grouped statistically, the crucial factor for the Christian community to recognize is that people from nearly all of those 193 countries have immigrated to America. The Dallas Independent School District, for instance, reports that almost 70 different languages are spoken in the homes of the children enrolled there (www.dallasisd.org). In population centers such as New York and Los Angeles those numbers would be even higher.

Immigration

The people of the world have come to America. And they have come not only to major population centers such as New York, Los Angeles, Miami, Chicago, and Dallas/Fort Worth, they have come to every State in our nation. Granted, some geographic regions have larger immigrant populations than do others, but an immigrant population is present in each of our fifty states. People from far away places, with cultural perspectives very different from our own have come to our communities, towns and cities. They live and work among us. And many of them do not know Jesus. They do not understand Christianity. Should Christians not see this as an amazing opportunity the Lord has given us?

The church still needs to think in terms of foreign missions. Both human and financial resources are needed to be faithful to Jesus' command to go and make disciples. God's people must cross geographic and cultural boundaries to tell the story of Jesus to people who will live out their lives in those far away places. We cannot ease up on foreign missions. However, since millions of people each year are coming to the United States from those far away places, the church needs to put significant resources (both human and financial) into cross-cultural missions right here in North America. We need to tell the story of Jesus to those who have immigrated to America. We need to plant ethnic churches all across our great nation.

Purpose

This book is not about the sociopolitical issue of legal and/or illegal immigration to the United States. The heated debates over immigration issues and the political rhetoric designed to appeal to voters has no place in this study. This book is about

effective evangelism primarily among first generation immigrants to America. Secondly it has to do with outreach to successive generations of immigrants not yet fully assimilated into mainstream society. Regardless of one's political convictions and loyalties, if one is a Christian, evangelism among immigrants ought to be a primary concern.

My purpose in this study is to assist church leaders in thinking about the opportunity that exists for outreach among immigrants, and to discuss methods of effective outreach. What is the best way to accomplish this purpose? First, I believe we need to spend some time considering some statistics about immigration and think about what is involved in the process of immigration. If we want to reach immigrants with the Good News about Jesus, we must understand immigrants: who they are, why they come, and the struggles they have in adjusting to a new culture.

Second, if we want to reach immigrants with the Good News about Jesus, we need to understand how to do that effectively. Where would one go to get that kind of information? To immigrants who have already been converted.

The foundation for this presentation is the data that was gathered during a series of interviews with 50 first generation immigrants from seven different cultures regarding their conversion experience. The interviews were conducted in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex in 2006. An interview guide (reproduced in Appendix A) was used in each interview to guide the process, assuring uniformity throughout the research project.

Interviews with six immigrant ministers, four Latino and two Asian, who lead ethnic churches also inform this study. Their observations about ministry among immigrants and their advice to church leaders who want to reach out to immigrant communities is insightful and helpful. The interview guide used in those interviews is included in Appendix B.

Scope

Every research project must have boundaries. The boundaries of this study have to do with:

1. who was interviewed: first generation immigrants from several different religious backgrounds (Catholicism, Buddhism, Daoism/Taoism, and a number of people who were non-religious) who were converted to a conservative Protestant form of Christianity after arriving in America,
2. where they were interviewed: in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex between April and June of 2006,
3. the number of interviews conducted: 50,
4. the numbers of cultures the interviewees represented: seven—Mainland China, Cambodia, Laos, Taiwan, Mexico, Honduras, Colombia.

Because of the limited scope of this study there are issues that cannot be addressed. For instance, since this research has to do with first generation immigrants, issues involving generations 1.5 or 2 are not primary concerns. This is not to suggest that issues related to generations 1.5 and 2 are not important. They are. They are simply beyond the scope of this study.

Definitions

In the context of this study the following terms will be used in the ways described:

1. *Immigrant*: Someone who is not born in this country who comes to live in this country. The term should not be considered negative or derogatory in any way. It is simply a term that designates a person who leaves his or her home culture and moves to another culture. The term foreign-born is sometimes used as a synonym for immigrant.
2. *First Generation Immigrant*: Someone who is an adult when they leave their home culture to immigrate to a new country.
3. *Generation 1.5*: Someone who is not an adult when they immigrate (usually with their parents) to a new culture. This is somewhat of a *fuzzy* concept. Obviously someone who is seventeen when he or she immigrates is not yet an adult (by American standards) but is more of an adult than a child and would most likely be considered a first generation immigrant. A child, however, from infancy to early teens, should be counted as a generation 1.5. The distinction between generation 1 and 1.5 is important because it is easier for a child to learn and adapt to the new culture than it is for an adult. The older the immigrant, the harder the acculturation and assimilation processes are. That is why, for research purposes, immigrant children have their own immigration category: generation 1.5.
4. *Generation 2*: The American-born children of generation 1 or 1.5s—children born after immigration has occurred.
5. *Enculturation*: The process of learning one's own culture as a child.
6. *Acculturation*: The process of learning a second culture later in life.
7. *Assimilation*: The intentional process of engaging in a new culture, becoming part of the mainstream of the new society one has adopted.
8. *Religious Conversion*: When I refer to the *religious conversion* of the immigrants we interviewed I am referring to the change in their religious beliefs and status that occurred as they changed from being either: 1) a non-religious person, 2) a non-Christian person, or 3) a Catholic Christian to become a conservative Protestant Christian. This is not to suggest that a conservative protestant expression of Christianity is the only acceptable expression of Christian faith. Rather, conversion to a conservative protestant form of Christianity is simply the context and frame of reference of this specific study.
9. *Latinos*: Immigrants from Spanish speaking cultures. There is a debate as to proper terminology. People with a Mexican ancestry prefer the term Hispanic. People from South American cultures prefer Latino. There are also Caribbean Spanish speaking cultures: Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic. In government documents, such as census material, the term Hispanic seems to be the designation of choice. However, in academic circles, the term Latino appears to be preferable. To simplify matters, I have chosen to use the term Latino when referring to peoples from Spanish speaking cultures.
10. *Anglos*: White people—even though many white people are not actually members of the Anglo-Saxon ethnic group.
11. *Ethnic Churches*: churches made up of ethnic groups other than Anglos.

Assumptions

My assumptions for this study are:

1. that the most accurate and valid source of information on the reasons immigrants are converted will come from the immigrants who have been converted,
2. that those who were converted after immigrating to America would be willing to discuss their conversion experience, explaining what led to their conversion, that is, what influences were present that motivated them to embrace their new faith,
3. that their conversion experiences would be very similar (insofar as *why* they were converted) whether they had those experiences in California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois or some other North American geographic region,
4. and that it was, therefore, not necessary to travel to different regions of the country to conduct interviews.

Methodology

A one-page interview guide was developed to lend consistent structure to the interview process. The interviews were conducted in a personal one-on-one setting. My wife, Glenda, assisted me in this research conducting a number of the interviews.

It was not my intention to gather and present quantifiable data, but rather qualitative data that could be presented in narrative form, enabling the individuals to speak for themselves, telling us how and why they were converted.

Overview

In Chapter 1 we will spend some time looking at immigration statistics and patterns in an attempt to understand the realities of our multiethnic American society. Chapter 2 will focus on the challenges of immigration, including acculturation and assimilation. Chapter 3 will be a presentation of the data gathered from the individuals we interviewed.

In Chapter 4, I will provide an analysis of the interview profile data and make some observations regarding what we learned. In Chapter 5, I will present information gathered from a number of ministers (who are themselves immigrants) who work with either Latino or Asian immigrants. They will discuss the challenges of their work and the methods they use in outreach and ministry. They will also offer some advice to church leaders who are thinking about beginning outreach among a specific immigrant group.

Chapter 6 will be a brief overview of the processes involved in planting ethnic churches. Chapter 7 will be a brief discussion about the missional church in a multiethnic society.

The basic question is, how can churches increase the effectiveness of their outreach among immigrants? That's what this book is about.

What You Won't Find

What you won't find in this book is an outline for a program of immigrant evangelism or a magic formula for planting and growing an ethnic church. Have you ever wondered why Jesus commissioned his followers to go and make disciples among all ethnic groups but didn't tell them how to do it? The reason Jesus didn't reveal to his followers a program of outreach or a sure fire church planting method is that there is no such thing. There is no program or method of outreach that works with all people in all cultural contexts. It would be nice if there was, but there isn't. So this book does not contain programs or formulas.

What this book does contain is perspective and information that you need to develop ways of working effectively among the immigrants that have come to your community. If you are wise and if you ask for the Lord's help he will bless you. With his blessing and with the help of the people who speak through this book you will find avenues of effective ministry to your immigrant community.