
Moving In (Immigration)

Most people of the first generation who immigrate to another country do so because of the second generation. They believe that life will be better for their children, that they will have more opportunities. Any generation that undertakes immigration knows that they will likely suffer more; but their children will benefit in the long run.

The first generation leaves the comfort and familiarity of home. They can be fairly certain they will lose prestige, power, influence, and status. Work will be hard—most likely long hours of manual labor. Pay will be low and the bulk of it may need to go back to the mother country for other family members. When language differences come into play, the downward turn goes deeper. The cost itself puts one into a financial hole that may plunge a family into poverty for a generation or more. Uncertainties abound, such as prejudice, job availability, housing, and time needed to develop functional language skills. For those who immigrate illegally, the possibility of getting caught, punished, and having to start over creates constant stress. Illegal entry also carries a hefty price tag, and may include modern forms of slavery.

Why does the first generation do this? Some take the long view and expect/hope that their children will benefit. Others immigrate on the spur of the moment, maybe receiving word that a job based on a family reference is available if they can arrive within 48 hours. They might depart immediately and send for the family later. Proper documentation isn't likely in such a short time span. But they go.

It should come as no surprise that many who immigrate immediately settle among their own people group. The cumulative collection of change is more manageable in such a setting. Language, food, friendship, a shared dream and journey, and security make this a

natural and wise choice. In times of radical change, religion can be a bastion of stability, provided it hasn't changed. Pastors of immigrant churches often function more like immigration agents than clergy. They assist with housing, job placement, connecting with other people, finances, transportation, and paperwork. They may also serve as translators and references. When it comes time for church, they are to oversee a worship service reminiscent of the homeland.

These generalizations apply to Hispanics, Asians, Caribbeans, Eastern Europeans, and Africans. Those are broad swaths, and multiple possibilities exist within such large areas. Hispanics from Mexico certainly differ compared to those from Cuba or those from Peru or Brazil. Koreans differ from Japanese, and do we dare put Islanders such as Filipinos in the broad, Asian group? Where should we place Indians or Pakistanis? How do Romanians differ from Poles or Russians or Serbs? In spite of major differences, immigrating to another country does thrust these disparate groups into some commonalities. One of these is the belief or hope that things will be better; and if not for the first generation, at least for the second or third generation.

This major investment by the first generation on behalf of the second generation often backfires. While the first generation feels magnetized to the miniature homeland, the second generation gets thrust into the new country and culture via the school system. This takes vast amounts of time and provides an immersion experience for the young people, who characteristically prove to be more adaptable than the adults in the first generation. As a result, the second generation ends up leading the first generation in the new culture. In places where the mother culture dominates, the first generation maintains its leading role. Immigrant churches typically retain the mother culture. Second and third generation young people who attend these churches step back into their childhood when they go to the immigrant church. They may feel like they have plunged into hyperspace

and instantly worship in what seems like the mother country. Either way, they feel retarded or incompetent, the same way the first generation feels outside of their familiar worship setting.

There is no need to further explain what several of the Hispanic papers in the second half of this book convey (see papers by Mercado, Norton, Paquini, and Flores; see paper by Beccai for similar insights from a Ghanaian). These writers provide helpful insights regarding the dynamics and challenges. I will add other ones here.

When second and third generation immigrants fail to fall into line, especially at church, it sends several messages. First of all, they have rejected their mother culture. Secondly, they have rejected God (as expressed in the immigrant church). Thirdly, they have demonstrated outright disrespect and ingratitude to the very people who sacrificed to give them greater opportunities. When the first generation immigrated, it wasn't for this purpose. But the second and third generations don't see progress if they stay within the limited confines of the miniature culture.

What a dilemma! If the second and third generations stay with the first generation, they will not fulfill the first generation's dream of their advancement. If they do advance, they will leave the first generation behind. Hence the tension and living between two worlds, especially for the second generation. The third generation, for all intents and purposes, has left. It will come for the potlucks!

In the 17th and 18th centuries, a number of Western Europeans immigrated to the New World (what is now the United States). Many of them did so because of religious persecution. Ironically, they ended up persecuting their second and third generations after they settled in this New World. But their motivation to immigrate came from spiritual roots. That's not why most people immigrate to the United States now. (One exception might be Korean Adventists, who state that avoiding military conscription as well as the 6-day school week sparks their immigration. Getting in to Loma Linda medical school could be another one!)

Perhaps the dominant reason people immigrate to the United States today is for the hope and dream that individuals can have the choice, opportunity, and power to become whatever they want to be. On a more mundane level, many see America as the place anyone can achieve material success, even though secularism dominates the current culture. How many people do you know who have immigrated to America for spiritual reasons? A few come to America to evangelize because they see this as the current mission field.

Immigrants to Western countries these days rarely chose to immigrate for spiritual reasons. Motivations could be materialistic, family advancement, escaping a bad situation, or some combination of multiple factors. When the primary motivations to immigrate are not spiritual, the first generation shouldn't be surprised when the second and third generations don't place God as their first priority. Their parents haven't, so why should the next generation do so?