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Ethnic Churches, Reverse Mission, and Urban Adventism in North America

Within the last few decades, ethnic churches have emerged all across North America, dotting the ecclesiastical landscape of its major cities. In noticeable contrast with older established churches with growth profiles that have plateaued, ethnic churches have witnessed significant growth both nationally and throughout the North American Division (NAD). This paper seeks to examine the rationale and growth for the existence of ethnic churches. It will also explore the missiological phenomenon referred to as reverse missions and what contributions it can make in responding to the urban challenge of mission in the cities by the Adventist Church in North America.

In his illuminating study on ethnic church planting in North America mission scholar Chuck Van Engen traced the emergence of ethnic churches to two notable realities: First, the fact that America has such a remarkable immigrant history that leads him to state repeatedly, “we are all immigrants.” Second, ethnic churches date a long way back to the early settlers in the new country of America (2004:3). American history depicts three major waves of immigration: (1) Protestants from northwestern Europe, (2) African slaves of the late 18th century, and (3) migrants from southern and eastern Europe who arrived between 1881 and 1930. However, to mission historian, Jehu Hanciles, the post 1965 migration of Christian immigrants is perhaps the most important when considering the missionary role and significance (2008:277-279). Recent research indicates that the number of international immigrants has surged from 154 million in 1990 to 232 million in 2013, with America as the destination of choice. One in five immigrants (that is 46 million) now live in America (Connor, Cohn, and Gonzalez-Barrera 2013). The study further reveals that the primary motivation of these modern migrants is the desire to pursue a better life (2013).

Migration and Mission: Biblical Antecedents

The call and commissioning of Abraham is the earliest indicator in the Old Testament of the intrinsic connection between migration and mission. Embedded in the very call of Abraham and in the covenant established between God and his descendants was the life of a sojourner and alien (Pohl 2003:5). Through obedience to God's call to the life of a migrant Abraham was to spread to the nations he visited the knowledge and worship of the true God, Creator of heaven and earth. Deriving from the background of their ancestor, Abraham, and in recognition of the role migration played in the fulfillment of God's missionary plan, ancient Israel was required to demonstrate compassion and hospitality to migrants (Lev 19:34). In his dedicatory prayer at the completion of the new temple Solomon also revealed a missiological understanding of migrants finding a place in God's house (2 Chr 6:32, 33).

Christian history also clearly reveals that migration was the primary agency through which the gospel spread from its early center in Jerusalem to the diverse metropolises around the world. Beginning with the dispersion of the believers after the death of Stephen (Acts 8), Christianity was spread across the empire by migrants who took their faith with them as they conducted business and fled persecution. Indeed, the link between migration and global religious expansion is one that remains "profound and inextricable," with both phenomena intensifying in recent decades (Hanciles 2008:118). Behind and beneath the growing trend of global migration can be discerned the visible hand of providence.

Migration and *Missio Dei*

Mission historian Andrew Walls has described the first major human migration that occurred from the 1500s to 1950s from the northern to the southern hemisphere as the Great European migration (2011:236). He regards the recent wave of migration that took place since the last half of the twentieth century from Africa, Asia, and Latin America as the Great Reverse migration (237). European migration between 1800-1925 was estimated at between 50-60 million, with the result that by 1915 21% of Europeans resided outside of Europe, occupying and controlling over one third of the inhabited world (Hanciles 2008:119). Although the primary motivation for these major periods of migration were largely economic the fact remains that they have always resulted in evangelization and renewal in the countries affected. It can therefore be inferred that "the movement and presence of people around the globe are not simply products of market forces. . . . Rather, God Himself orchestrates the globalizing phenomenon of human migration" (Pocock, Van Rheenen, and McConnell 2005:30).

Migration and Ethnic Churches in America

The migration of European Christians to the newly discovered land of America largely transpired along ethnic and linguistic lines with the new migrants importing with them the cultural and theological baggage of their times (Emetuche 2012:2). These migrants were mostly content to remain in their cultural enclaves—the English Puritans in New England, Dutch Reformed in New York, English Anglicans in the mid-Atlantic, Swiss-German Mennonites in Pennsylvania. However, economic constraints forced them to seek frontier jobs resulting eventually in cultural integration (Emetuche 2012:2). Chuck Van Engen avers stating that “the history of Christianity in America is a history of ethnically-defined and culturally-shaped religion” (2004:7). Although America has long been referred to as the melting pot of various cultures, more often than not this imagery is presently rejected due to the fact that there are over 500 ethnic groups speaking 636 different languages with 26 of these as major languages, besides the English language (Van Engen 2004:5).

One major difference however that Van Engen notes between the early nineteenth century immigrant churches and the immigrant churches of the 1980s and 1990s is that while the former consisted of people with a shared worldview from the Enlightenment era, the worldview of these new immigrant churches are as diverse as the ethnic groups represented (8). Church planting in America, perhaps for the above reasons, has usually fallen along ethnic lines.

Homogenous Unit Principle and Ethnic Churches

One of the most influential theories of church planting is the homogenous unit principle whose major advocate was Donald McGavran. As a result from his studies of why some congregations after so many years remained sterile while others witnessed large “people movements” to Christ, McGavran explained in his influential book on church growth, “People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers” (1990:163). This principle reveals undeniable observations about how churches have tended to grow: “Great growth has almost always been caste-wise. When the Church has made its greatest strides, individuals became Christian with their fellow tribesmen, with their kindred and with their people” (Van Engen 2004:11).

The homogenous unit principle, which for several decades has influenced church planting strategies in America, has unwittingly justified a nuanced form of segregation in the mission and ministry of the church. Although McGavran rightly observed that “this principle states an undeniable fact. Humans do build barriers against their own societies”

(1990:163). Nevertheless, it would appear that the homogenous unit principle is flawed theologically and sociologically. Christ in his ministry and in the commission given to his disciples demonstrated how the gospel was to break down dividing walls and destroy ethnocentrism in all its forms (John 4; Acts 1:8; Eph 2). For, as Carlos Martin rightly observes,

At the very heart of Jesus' mission is a focused attempt to breakdown ethnocentrism, the attitude to ethnicity which holds at a distance those who do not share one's ethnic identity. He does this by redefining the people of God in non-ethnic terms by preparing a faithful remnant of Israel to break through ethnic barriers, and by establishing a foundation for a multiethnic church. (2011:252)

Indeed the power of the gospel lies in its very ability to make diverse cultures and ethnicities united as a testimony to the presence and power of God in the life and witness of the church. The sociological absurdity of the homogenous principle in contemporary society is demonstrated by Van Engen, who laments,

People representing many different cultures in a place like, say, Cerritos, California, are the same folks who attend the same schools together, who keep their money in the same banks, shop at the same malls, use the same hospitals, buy groceries in the same supermarkets, and drive the same freeways. Is there, then, any reason for them to be "segregated" when it comes to their church attendance? (2004:32)

The homogenous unit principle unconsciously reinforces primordial human sentiments of ethnicity, the nature of which erupted in Yugoslavia, and especially in Rwanda, where Christian bonds were subjugated by ethnic allegiances (Ferdinando 2009:3). In Rwanda, for instance, many of the perpetrators and accomplices of the genocide were active members of Christian congregations. A Catholic bishop is reported to have lamented, "We have to begin again because our best catechists, those who filled our churches, were the first to go out with machetes in their hands" (Ferdinando 2009:8, 9). Obviously, ethnicity in that context trumped every shred of Christian morals and ideals.

Although the homogenous unit principle may make sense in contexts or settings where the population is largely homogenous, it is clear that the urban centers in America are in dire need of a multicultural model for missions in her cities. Multicultural and multiethnic churches have in recent years been the emphasis and the preferred model of the church in urban contexts. Besides the push for intentionally designed multiethnic churches in urban America there has emerged an increased presence of

congregations led by migrants which have the goal of re-evangelizing the countries of the West that have become bastions of secularism. These migrants from Africa, Asia, and Latin America engaging in reverse missions have found a modicum of success in Europe already.

Reverse Missions and Urban America

In the United Kingdom the largest Christian congregation, Kingsway International Christian Church, is headed by African Matthew Ashimolowo. This congregation however, is largely composed of persons from African descent and is a perfect example of what is now referred to as a diaspora church. Sunday Adelaja's Embassy of the Kingdom of God Church in Kiev is a marked contrast though. In this church, which has church plants throughout Eastern Europe, the membership is largely made up of national Ukrainians. The church has an estimated membership of 30,000.

Among the Catholic and Anglican congregations in Europe it is no longer strange to find African priests whose celebration of the mass is more upbeat than usual. Among American evangelicals the diaspora churches are mainly ethnic churches led by ministers trained and resident in America. However, a few of these diaspora/ethnic congregations in recent times have sometimes resorted to the practice of requesting pastors from their home countries who are fluent in the local language and still retain the dynamism and conservative values in harmony with their homeland. Such is the case with the Haitian, Korean, and Kenyan Adventist churches in America. A growing tension however among a number of these Adventist ethnic churches centering on leadership is, what to do with second-generation migrants who see themselves more as Americans and have no strong desire to retain their ethnic identities.

The charismatic and Pentecostal churches from Africa, Asia, and Latin America seem to be the ones more enthused about the prospects of reverse missions. On their own they have sought to establish congregations in America to not only care for persons of the same ethnic extractions but also to reach out to American citizens who they consider to have become secular and in need of re-evangelization. Unfortunately, most of the success they have attained is found typically among their kin. Damian Emetuche attributes the failure of African, Asian, South American, or other ethnic churches to evangelize America as owing to the adoption of the homogenous principle of church planting which he demonstrates is "rooted in the nature, tradition, culture and constituent of the American history and migration pattern" (2012:7).

What model of the church therefore should be found in the burgeoning metropolises of urban America? How may such churches become agencies

for effective mission in these sprawling cities? This section of the paper seeks to respond to these questions.

Multicultural Cities and Multicultural Churches

In the foregoing section it has been demonstrated that the multicultural church in urban contexts is a theological and practical necessity. Supporting this premise Van Engen declares that the kind of churches planted in urban America should be multiethnic in order to reflect the ethos of the community. He explains that “if there is too little identification with the culture, the church becomes a subcultural ghetto. If it assumes too much of the culture’s perspectives and values, it domesticates and tames the gospel. The latter has become the major problem for the churches of North America” (2004:35).

It is in multicultural churches that the miracle of unity in diversity, a testimony of the divine power and presence of God, is reflected (John 17:20-23). For it is only through the mighty working of God that ethnic, social, and other biases, which raise barriers and walls, can be overcome. At the heart of the issue of the existence of ethnic churches are the twin demons of pride and prejudice (White 1898:403), which are limiting factors to the evangelistic mission of the church.

The Role of Ethnic Churches

Ethnic churches nevertheless do have a critical role to play in ministry to the immigrants found in the bustling urban centers. Among the functions ethnic churches serve are providing a sense of community and belonging, bestowing a support system for needy immigrants, reinforcing communal values, establishing a forum for learning local languages for second generation migrants, and a base for launching mission programs to the homeland. Thus the church provides spiritual and socio-economic support systems to help migrants assimilate into their new environment (Koning 2011:15). To facilitate assimilation and adaptation Korean migrant churches provide four social functions: (1) fellowship, (2) maintaining tradition, (3) social services, and (4) social status, thus serving as “a home away from home for many generations of immigrant families” (Wang 2011:23).

Evaluation of Ethnic Churches

Clearly ethnic churches have an indispensable missionary role to a growing segment of urban America such as no other agency can provide. What is more, such a ministry is strategic in winning people who in their homelands would never have access to Christianity; for instance,

the Chinese. Ethnic churches also play a stabilizing and preservative role for migrant Adventists who could possibly get lost in their struggle for financial survival in the cities of America (Koning 2011:14). Ethnic churches also have a noteworthy influence beyond simply retaining or reaching out to people of their own group. In spite of the marginalization they experience, due to accent, culture, and worldview differences, a number of the English-speaking migrant churches, especially those from West Africa, regard the West as a mission field to be delivered from the grip of secularism and sexual immorality.

Ethnic churches also constitute a vital revitalizing and renewing force that can nurture American Christianity, presently exhibiting a decline in vitality, attendance, and membership (Hanciles 2008:286). For these reasons, Danielle Koning regards ethnic churches as treasures in tension. Her research on Ghanaian Adventist churches in Holland revealed that although isolated and marginalized, their special prayer sessions, in addition to healing and exorcism programs attracted and were appealing to local people (2011:18). Contributory factors to the appeal of ethnic church programs are their dynamism, resilience, zeal, and charisma. In comparison to the more restrained expressions of religion found in the older Western churches, ethnic churches showcase a spiritual vitality that is appealing to many who would have previously found no attraction to more formal devotional patterns.

Unfortunately, although ethnic churches play a significant missionary role in witnessing to migrant communities, and in stimulating spiritual renewal among indigenous Western peoples, they still can only be found along the fringes of church life and mission in North America. Some of the smaller ethnic churches find great difficulty in being accepted into the organization and structure of the local conference. Immigrant pastors working with such churches often find themselves confined for the rest of their ministries to a particular local church unable to relocate to any other type of church.

The question that badly needs to be answered is, What can be done in order to harness the missionary potential of ethnic churches in the cities of America? In other words, what model of church would be most effective in fulfilling the mission objectives of the Adventist Church in North America? Theologically, the model of church I wish to propose for more effective mission in urban America is larger multicultural churches that have taken smaller ethnic churches under their wings to partner with them in mission and ministry. This is because the eschatological church of the end-time will be a racially diverse church whose ethnic diversity is reflective of the character of God and the worship due to him (Matthews and Park 2011:174).

The Adventist Church in North America must seek to take its mission in the cities to the highways and byways (Matt 22:9-10). Among the people that will be encountered in such mission endeavors are the destitute, homeless, and junkies. It is with these categories that the ethnic churches have had plenty of experience and have built an established network for reaching them. Although such a profile of prospects may not appear very desirable to the older established churches in America, it needs to be remembered that many in the ranks of the wealthy Adventists in the North American Division today were two or three generations ago regarded as poor migrants. Furthermore, second and third generation members of today's immigrants, if retained within the church, shall later transition into the wealthy persons in the church of tomorrow.

One thing is clear though, ethnic churches have a unique niche to fill in the lives of immigrants that would be difficult to replace. This why there is a need for collaboration between ethnic churches and indigenous churches. Ethnic churches possess relational and relevant systems of networks, while indigenous churches have more adequate funding, infrastructure for worship and mission, and social acceptability.

Church calendars of indigenous churches should include multicultural Sabbaths and programs that facilitate unity in diversity, which is the goal of the Christian Church. Also, indigenous urban churches should adopt nearby ethnic churches and should partner with them in animated and relevant missions to the cities. Local conferences should also find ways to encourage the distribution and posting of immigrant pastors from the global south to lead out in multicultural churches in their territories.

Conclusion

History teaches us that the center of Christianity has always been in a state of flux. At the heart of this constant movement are migrants who have borne with them in their displacements their faith and missionary passion. Since migration and globalization have produced significant challenges to how mission can be conducted in the cities of contemporary North America, it is therefore of extreme importance that new paradigms be sought to respond to the rapid changes that are evident in contemporary missions. A new paradigm that seems to be emerging under the direction of the Holy Spirit is the emergence of ethnic churches and the phenomenon of reverse missions. The church in North America should be ready to embrace ethnic churches and the missiological opportunity migration provides. It should also—with intentionality—establish strategic collaboration with ethnic churches and agents of reverse missions in order to coordinate a more comprehensive and effective mission partnership for witness to the cities.

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