

Current Thoughts

from Dwight's corner

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This is Part II of the essay on our mission context inspired by the GRR Mission Conference (e-Current 060125) was Part I). In that earlier essay I introduced five characteristics of our changing mission context, and wrote in some detail about Post-Colonialism and Post-Denominationalism. In this essay I want to address Immigration.

Immigration

This is not the place for a detailed analysis of immigration to the United States, but there is some basic information we need to share. We all need to spend some time sorting out fact, fiction, and prejudice.

Immigration has been a reality of life in the United States from the very beginning. However, the numbers of immigrants, the countries of origin of those immigrants, and the motivations for immigration have changed somewhat in the last 200 years.

The peak of immigration in the last century was 1901-1910. There were almost 9 million immigrants in that decade. Nearly 92% of those immigrants came from Europe. As a result about 13% of the US population was foreign-born (compared to 8.5% today).

While the raw numbers of immigrants (including “illegals”) in the decade 1991-2000 rival the decade of 1901-1910, the rate of immigration today is only about one-third of the rate at the beginning of the 20th Century. Not only that, the country of origin for those immigrants has changed dramatically. In 1991-2000, over 40% of immigrants came from Canada or Mexico (almost all from Mexico). Another 25% came from Asia (which sent less than 4% of the immigrants in 1901-1910). Europe contributed less than 13% of the immigrant population at the close of the 20th Century.

Most of us have had first-hand experience with this. I attended high school with the children of German rocket scientists, but was in college before I met an Asian. My daughter attended high school with Egyptian Muslims, Asiatic-Indian Hindus, and Mexican Roman Catholics.

The attitude of US citizens to immigration has been remarkably consistent for decades—we don't like it. One survey response in 1919 was typical (and could be heard today): “The people who came here in earlier times were good folks, but the people who are coming in now are purely scum.”

Immigrants have always tended to create their own communities, complete with churches, stores, clubs, and even schools to preserve their identity. That urge for identity tended to wane in subsequent generations. It is also true that World War II did much to impose a more common identity on US citizens and residents.

While the rate of immigration today is actually down compared to its peak at the opening of the 20th Century, it is evident that for the memories of those who are alive, immigration is exploding. Not only does it seem like the numbers are increasing, the origins of immigrants are different. Finally, we are not experiencing a unifying event like World War II. In fact, the Post-911 world has increased our suspicion of and resistance to immigrants.

I could say more, but what does immigration have to do with the church and our mission context today?

First, it challenges our deep-seated motivation that “mission” is going to exotic peoples “across the sea.” Those men, women, and children may live right “across the street” from us. I remember last year when Mylinda Baits (ABC missionary in Costa Rica) was speaking at the GRR Mission Conference. She said (and I quote roughly): “Mission teams visit Costa Rica and beam, ‘The children are so lovely here.’ Don’t you have lovely children in your own neighborhoods???”

There is truth in the proverb that familiarity breeds contempt, or at least blind neglect. Who lives around us that we simply do not see because we have presumed that “mission” means going far away? Have I paid attention to how my community is changing?

Second, it may be even deeper and more embarrassing than that. Europe was never much of a mission destination for American Christians. That cannot be because Christianity was thriving in Europe. Can it be that we had so mingled Christianity, Western civilization, and modern progress that we just never heard a “Macedonian call” from Europe?

Take it a step further. Today the people groups who had been the historic targets of “missions” (meaning poor, downtrodden, uncivilized) are now not only living and working among us, their native countries are sending missionaries here. Our presumptions of cultural superiority with latent racism and parentalism are exposed for what they are. We are pleased to send missionaries “over there” as long as “they” stay there—we really don’t want them in our neighborhoods or our churches.

This is a wake-up call for confession of prejudice and parentalism (even if well-intended). What needs to change in my heart, and the heart of my church so I can do missions with those persons that God has brought to me?

Third, we are confronted, up close and personal, with religious pluralism that almost defies description. We cannot presume that immigrants (even if they are from historic mission fields) are spiritually ignorant or unsophisticated. Recent immigrants are twice as likely as resident US citizens to claim that religion is very important to them. In fact, it is quite likely that recent immigrants are already Christians. Consequently, we must be prepared to deal with a variety of religious traditions, and even a variety of Christian expressions.

We must come to a deeper understanding of our own Christian faith so we can talk with others about Jesus Christ and invite them to participate in our community of faith. I think that will be good for us.

We must also accept the probability that the “church culture” of immigrant Christians may not merge so seamlessly with our own. Differences in worship styles and music may be a challenge for us. Even more difficult may be the subtle signs of civic religion that are sprinkled into our practices. I think of holidays (like Mothers Day, Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, etc) that

are deeply embedded in the traditions of some churches, but may be meaningless (or even offensive) to immigrants (who have their own “Christian” holidays).

I think of secular signs (like national flags and patriotic songs) that are also deeply embedded, but no less offensive to immigrants. Some of those immigrants have experienced real oppression and persecution by their own governments. Others have experienced oppression and violence linked to US government and businesses. Both are puzzled by what appears to be an unexamined endorsement of any government or business by the Church.

Consequently, our mission work may not be to persuade “them” to join “our” church, but to open our church facility so an immigrant worshipping community of disciples can have a home. Our mission work may be to partner with immigrants so they can plant a church in the community they have settled. Our mission work may be to discover the needs of those immigrant persons and respond, as full-fledged brothers and sisters, to that need with a cool cup of water in Jesus’ name.

For more facts about immigration, check out:

PBS special story on immigration:

<http://www.pbs.org/kcet/newamericans/>

Compilation of online resources:

<http://www.d230.org/stagg/LiskaLinks/immigration.htm>

US government Office of Immigration

<http://uscis.gov/graphics/shared/aboutus/statistics/publist.htm>

