

## **Unwelcome strangers: The suffering of migrants and refugees as an ecumenical global challenge for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.**

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*You may have noticed mediareports on shipwrecks and diverted ships carrying migrant job seekers from North Africa destined for Europe with frequently flashed pictures of people dying in sinking boats, stranded in the deserts or risking lives to cross dangerous forests. These images have one thing in common; desperate people fleeing poverty, wars, and natural disasters in pursuit for a better life. The glaring lack of global political commitment and the invisibility of the Church in dealing with this human catastrophe prompts one to ask: If Jesus Christ died for humanity to have “an abundant life” (John 10:10) should people continue to sacrifice their lives in order to have a better life? As we approach the year 2015 which marks the targets for the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the first of which says “To eradicate extreme poverty and hunger”, this question becomes more pertinent.*

*This article examines the phenomenon of intensified human mobility in the South African context and raises questions around the suffering experienced by migrants and refugees throughout the world. It is my thesis that Christian faith is fundamentally the story of a people on the move, the “pilgrims” and therefore a people who should see in the experiences of migrants and refugees, their own identity and experience. The paper laments the absence of meaningful theological and ecumenical engagement on these challenges and argues that intensified human mobility has ecclesiological and missiological implications and calls on Christian witness to be centred on care and welcoming of strangers*

Statistics on global movement of people by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM: 2010) show that there are more than 200 million people migrating around the world, or one out of every thirty five people in the planet are living out their country of birth. In 2010 the World Migration Report (2010) also estimated the number of international migrants in Africa to be 19 million; an increase of 1.5 million migrants since 2005. This figure accounts for 9% of the total global stock of migrants, and of these, 2.2 million were estimated to be in Southern Africa of which 1.9 million were hosted by South Africa (WMR, 2010).

According to the above reports, South Africa is the most preferred destination for people migrating in Southern Africa with the bulk of these migrants settling in big cities such as Johannesburg. As early as 1982, a study conducted by the South African Council of

Churches<sup>1</sup> (Jacobs, 1982) gave warnings that migration and displacements of people, as a growing global phenomenon, will impact not just on the social and economic spheres of sending and receiving communities or countries<sup>2</sup>, but also on the church's mission and identity. Thus, the movement of people across borders has ecclesiastical and missiological implications that cannot be ignored.

Sadly, there has been very little theological and ecumenical engagement on the complex challenges posed by human migration, particularly from the southern African context. It should be noted however, that some sociological, economic and political studies have attempted dealing with these challenges but not from an ecumenical or missiological perspective. For example, in the light of increasing numbers of migrants within the Johannesburg inner city and growing threats of xenophobic attacks, scholars like Landau and Seggati (2011), in their work '*Contemporary Migration to South Africa, A regional Development Issue*', have sought to understand the phenomenon of migration from a developmental perspective with a view to exploring models of promoting integration/social cohesion, enhancing tolerance and addressing xenophobia, as well as seeking to understand the experiences of migrants in South Africa. Working through the Africa Centre for Migration and the Southern Africa Migration Project<sup>3</sup> they have conducted studies exploring how migrant communities articulate, negotiate and construct meanings to suffering experienced as a result of living in a foreign country. Similarly Crush, Ramachandran, & Pendleton (2013) in their work *Soft Targets: Xenophobia, Public Violence and Changing Attitudes to Migrants in South Africa after May 2008* offer significant insights on how South Africans perceive foreign nationals. Acknowledging the significance of these developments; the Southern African Missiological Society<sup>4</sup> made a call for proposals on the subject of Migration in Africa in March 2012, after raising a critical question: "where is Christian mission located in all of these matters in a continent where migration has become a way of life?"

There are also studies that have been conducted by African Scholars such as Mnyaka (2003), Nzayabiono (2005) and Phakathi (2010) who have attempted to examine human migration

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<sup>1</sup> This handbook by the South African Council of Churches entitled: "*Refugees: A challenge to the South African Churches- A Ministry to Refugees Handbook*" identified the situation of refugees as a challenge to the South African churches and developed a handbook for the ministry to refugees. At that time, there were concerns about South Africans in refugee centres around Southern Africa as people fled uprisings against apartheid and liberation movements fighting against colonialism.

<sup>2</sup> According to the World Migration Report (2010), Yevgeny Kuznetsov, a senior economist with the Knowledge for Development Programme at the World Bank Institute asserts that there is increasing evidence that migrant remittances have a positive impact on poverty alleviation in the countries of origin.

<sup>3</sup> The Africa Centre for Migration and Society is based at the University of Witwatersrand, in Johannesburg. The Southern Africa Migration Project .The Southern African Migration Programme (SAMP) is an international network of organizations founded in 1996 to promote awareness of migration-development linkages in SADC with offices in Canada and Cape Town. According to information available on their website ([www.queensu.ca](http://www.queensu.ca)) SAMP conducts applied research on migration and development issues, provides policy advice and expertise, offers training in migration policy and management, and conducts public education campaigns on migration-related issues.

<sup>4</sup> The Southern African Missiological Society ([www.http://missionalia.wordpress.com](http://missionalia.wordpress.com)) posted an invitation for proposals in research aimed at addressing migration issues in Africa. The dead-line for these submissions was 15 March 2012 which had to be extended to June 2012. In my opinion, this extension was due to limited scholarly work or people interested in dealing with matters related to migration and mission.

from the perspective of religion – although they have also not paid enough attention to the ecclesiological and missional aspects of the experience of migration. Heeding the call of the Second Vatican Council for churches to consider human migration as a “sign of our times” (Blume, 2002) more theological reflections have emerged alongside the sociological, economic and politically motivated debates on migration in Europe- laying the foundations and providing lenses for an African perspective on the subject. Indeed, migration is also a critical developmental issue for Africa as well, and some of the questions in this present paper have been raised by African scholars concerned with the religious experiences and migration, among them Orobator (2005) and Ohajiriogu (2009) who also allude to the fact that religion plays an important role in shaping and maintaining identity among migrant populations, although they do not pay much attention to the ecclesiological and missiological dimensions of the experience of migration. As people move, they do not leave behind their religious experiences; instead, they move with them and articulate their migration experiences in the light of personal theological reflections of the journey. According to Nzayabino (2005), religion plays an important role in shaping the identity of individuals and especially in the light of Gunn’s assertion that like “identity, religion is less a matter of theological beliefs than it is an issue of family, culture, ethnicity, and nationality” (2002: 16).

It is in this context that I have noted the glaring absence of ecumenical engagement or little (if any) on the phenomenon of migration - not just as the movement of goods and information, but more significantly as the movement of people across ecclesiological boundaries. Such engagement could lead to the following:

- A deepened understanding of the missiological and ecclesiological issues which arise from the experiences of migrants and refugees.
- Developing missiological insights from the experiences of migrants as a conduit for healing and developing pastoral approaches to the needs of migrants and refugees.
- Developing alternative models of care based on the experience for migrants to promote human rights, human dignity and tolerance within the global world order.

Reports by regional organizations that are working with migrants, refugees and displaced people such as the Southern African Migration Project (SAMP) through their Migration Policy series and People Against Suffering Suppression Oppression and Poverty (PASSOP) present a gloomy picture on human migration to the southern and South African context. The data provided by these reports is authoritative and broadly focuses on the sociological, economic and political realities of migration, casting it as a critical challenge for our time.

Unfortunately, we have not embraced these realities as an urgent front for ecumenism. It’s never too late, we can rely on this data to lay a foundation for examining the missiological and ecclesiological implications of migration from an ecumenical perspective. For example, Basic documents on International Migration Law; edited by Richard Plender (2007), Crossing Borders, Migration Ethnicity and AIDS edited by Mary Haour- Knipe and Richard Rector (1996); Coerced and Free Migration: Global Perspectives by David Eltis (2002) and Forced Migration in Eastern Africa, Democratization, Structural Adjustment and Refugees by Cassandra R. Veney (2007) provide additional information on the global, regional and national trends and implications for migration.

We need to unpack the sociological and economic implications of migration from the perspectives of human identity and/or dignity, citizenship and belonging through texts such

as, *Citizenship Acquisition and National Belonging: Migration, Membership and the Liberal Democratic State* edited by Calder, Cole and Seglow (2010); *Global Migration, Social change and Cultural Transformation* edited by Emory Eliot, Jasmine Payne and Patricia Ploesch (2007); and *Stories of Identity, Religion, Migration and Belonging in a Changing World- a facing History and Ourselves* Publication (2008).

Sharing insights on his new book on Catholic Mission, *A Century of Catholic Mission: 1910 to the Present Day* (Bevans 2013) at the Global Ecumenical Theological Institute (GETI), Stephen Bevans employs Michael Nazir-Ali, to attest that indeed, mission today is “from everywhere to everywhere” (Nazir-Ali 2009). He adds that particularly because our age is an “Age of Migration” (see Castles and Miller 2009), migrants and refugees from the beginning of the Christian era, are themselves becoming missionaries. Such an understanding of the world of Christianity should enable us to appreciate the significance of human mobility in enriching our Christian mission.

### ***Three important factors for understanding migration from a theological perspective***

In order to appreciate the role of the ecumenical movement in addressing the challenges highlighted above, we have to be mindful that human migration has always been a part of the Christian narrative. Biblical stories are rich in chronicling geographical movements of the patriarchs: Abraham and Sarah; Isaac and Rebekah; Jacob and Rachel; Joseph, his brothers and their descendants who later became immigrants and slaves in Egypt. We learn also about the journey of Moses and the children of Israel to the promised land; the experience of the Babylonian exile; Ruth, the foreign and immigrant woman whom Matthew's Gospel lists among Jesus' ancestors (Mt 1:5).

It is for these reasons that the God of Israel constantly reminds people to receive, respect and love the immigrants as they love themselves, "for you were immigrants in the land of Egypt" (Lev 19:33-34). In the New Testament narratives, the gospel of Matthew details how new born Jesus takes refuge in Egypt with his family to escape the violent and homicidal persecution of King Herod (Mt 2:13-15). In the same Gospel Jesus identifies with the stranger and indicates the attitude of welcoming as one of the main criteria of the "final judgment" (Mt 25:35, 43). The First Letter of Peter also relates how the first Christian communities were composed also of strangers and immigrants who had welcomed the good news proclaimed by Jesus' disciples and were striving to live it out in an urban environment that was often hostile to them. Indeed, the above biblical references show how important matters around human mobility have shaped the story of Christian faith and indeed how critical it is for theological reflection to include the phenomenon of human mobility as part of its core agenda. It is therefore critical that ecumenism examines its role and involvement in Christian theology in light of the experience of human migration.

*The first theological factor I wish to briefly examine is what can be called a “social factor”*

According to Castles and Miller (2009) the social factor of the experience of migration refers to the interpretation that some sociologists have given of the current era as the age of migration. Of course, migration has always been a part of humanity; but in this globalized world, improved transport and communication networks have facilitated rapid movement of goods and people resulting in multicultural and diverse communities. These are developments that demand a shift in theological reflection. For example, what does it mean for me to be a Presbyterian Christian who grew up in Zimbabwe and now living in Johannesburg? Indeed, these rapidly changing social, political and geographical realities challenge Christian theology and mission to urgently deal with the phenomenon of human mobility.

*The second factor is the “theological”*

As noted by Castles and Miller (2009) the theological factor concerns the fundamental importance that human history and experience, considered in the diversity of geographical and cultural contexts, have acquired in contemporary theology an essential loci for reflecting on Christian faith. In Roman Catholicism the two loci theologici par excellence have conventionally been Scripture and tradition. The discovery of the crucial theological import of human history and experience in context, particularly in countries of the Global South faced with extreme social, economic, and political hardships, has led to a new way of conceiving the objective of theology: it can no longer be considered as solely a speculative discipline; it also assumes an eminently "praxical" dimension. In other words, the goal of theology is not simply to understand, but to transform the reality of oppression, violence, and sin in which people live as they journey toward the realization of the reign of God. As Stephen and Bevans (2002) rightly observe, it is precisely in this sense that the term "praxis" has taken on an ever-growing significance in theological thinking, even though (as they note) the meaning of this word has not always been properly comprehended and explained.

*The third and last factor is “pastoral-practical”*

This refers to the experience of pastoral agents engaged in the work of ministering to migrants and believers who take questions around human mobility seriously. These questions border around the church and theology and are intended to shed some light on this complex phenomenon that often leaves believers perplexed as they struggle to live between the imperative of Christian compassion and the need for security, as well as to live together in harmony with the newly arrived members of communities often regarded with suspicion and hostility. There is a need for spiritual and theological resources that can equip pastoral formations to minister in societies that are rapidly changing and becoming culturally and religiously diverse. More importantly, it should not be forgotten that the migrants themselves are grappling with their own experiences in the light of their faith to give theological meaning to the challenges they face. It is for this reason that it has been suggested that the experiences of migrants should become one of the focal points of the theology of migration.

These three factors help to explain, even if not entirely, the current theological interest in migration and also fuel the hope that such reflection will gain greater prominence and enrich ecumenical engagement in tackling the suffering faced by migrants and refugees.

## **A Theological Statement on Immigration**

I wish to conclude by referring to Woodstock's theological statement on migration. It highlights the challenges and the opportunities to love the stranger as ourselves, and to love the stranger as one with whom Jesus explicitly identifies; one who forms an integral part of Christian faith. It is therefore imperative for Christian churches (or communities) to be bearers of the biblical and historical tradition of hospitality in our own local contexts. This means that the relevance of Christian faith will be demonstrated through the practice of mercy towards the stranger. In the Bible, the stranger is often characterized by the condition of vulnerability. The vulnerability of strangers reminds us of our own dependence on the mercy and kindness of God and compels us to act towards the stranger as God has acted towards us.

The stranger, by definition, is an outsider, and may be excluded from the networks which insiders rely on for the satisfaction of their daily needs. Therefore, Christian teaching about hospitality insists that strangers be treated the same way as insiders and so, the outsider becomes our neighbor. The stranger is created in the image of God (just like us) and shares the same rights as the rest of us simply because of their humanness.

In welcoming the stranger the people of God are required to establish justice on their behalf. Given the vulnerability of undocumented migrants and stateless people throughout the world, the role of churches advocating for the stranger is a crucial matter of justice and a corporate expression of our faith. Political advocacy is a legitimate aspect of the mission of the church for it affirms the human dignity of migrants and seeks to ensure their equal access to economic, social, and political resources. Justice for the stranger means that those who contribute to our communities should be given opportunities for full membership in those communities.

Lastly, in welcoming the stranger the people of God must seek transforming relationships with the stranger. In Scripture, the stranger often appears as a "herald," or one who brings news. In the book of Hebrews, the writer says in giving hospitality to the stranger you may be welcoming an angel without knowing it.

Therefore, we as God's people welcome the stranger not only because we are commanded to do so, but more importantly, because through their lives and their stories we hear the good news of God's love and faithfulness to all of humanity. In the presence of the stranger God is calling us to new horizons of opportunity and responsibility, in which, hospitality to the stranger is necessary for the church's faithfulness to God. In human history there is no question that movement of people changes both immigrants (and migrants) and the locals, we are mutually transformed. In responding directly to the challenges of immigration and migration, the biblical ethic of hospitality leads Christian communities to emphasize, not the threats, but rather the gifts and the possibilities for creative multicultural communities in which we can all embrace diversity.

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