

MOVING BEYOND HOMOGENEITY: IMMIGRATION, WESLEYAN HOSPITALITY AND A PREFERRED FUTURE FOR THE CHURCH

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Homogeneity. It is an instinctive part of our human nature, of cultures and communities, and kingdoms. It is the place that provides comfort and a sense of belonging. It is our people, our food, our language, and our way of life; and when an ‘other’ disrupts our semblance of what is right, we react. We protect, we shun, we put up walls, and we demand uniformity because of our human nature.

A dichotomy ensues at some point when we experience the welcome invitation into communion with God and into the community of God. This intrusion into our homogeneous lives introduces a different nature, a new nature that has been given to the Church. This is the spiritual nature that proceeds from the Triune Godhead. This spiritual nature was breathed into those gathered on the day of Pentecost, “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance,”¹ and continues to be breathed into the Church generation after generation.

How does the Church exist in simultaneous unity and diversity? Is the nature of the ecclesia transformed from homogeneity into heterogeneity? How does the Church embody holiness found in the spiritual nature of the Godhead? As we participate in table fellowship within the community of faith, how are we also experiencing communion with the Triune Godhead, and with the Church catholic? How does communion with the Triune God speak into the apostolic work of the ecclesia? As the Church exists in relationship with the Triune God in a place of belonging, how can the Church extend the same welcome to the immigrant, the stranger, the ‘other’ living among us? The purpose of this paper is to speak into the preferred future of the Church, embracing the spiritual nature of the Triune Godhead to become the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, particularly in response to the immigrant living among us.

International Migration

“International migration is a global phenomenon that is growing in scope, complexity and impact. Migration is both a cause and effect of broader development processes and an intrinsic feature of our ever-globalizing world.”² While the United Nations has empirical data, which confirms this “feature” of a globalized world, this new paradigm of global interconnectedness has created a shifting context few populations are willing to embrace. The published U.N. Report of the Secretary-General on International Migration and Development contains examples of the difficulties inherent to international migration including: the high number of migrants who die either at sea or while crossing international borders, the denial of equal access to education and health services for migrant children, the “de-skilling” or “brain waste” of educated migrants, and

¹ The Holy Bible, *Acts 2:4 (ESV)*.

² “International Migration - United Nations Population Division | Department of Economic and Social Affairs.”

the negative stereotypes that exist with regard to migrants and migration.³ And while majority populations exhibit symptoms of xenophobia, this reality of living in a multicultural existence will soon become a way of life across our globe, our nation and in our own communities.

According to a report of the Pew Research Center in 2013, there are 40.4 million immigrants living in the United States, of which 11.2 million were undocumented.⁴ And while undocumented migrants present challenges to economic and social systems, the political policies of our national government still fail to bring resolution to an issue that has incited division within our nation, our communities and unfortunately within the Church.

Social and Economic Impact

With an increasing number of immigrants pouring across international borders, our homogeneous identities are being threatened. This globalization trend is affecting every world area. As the prospect of continued homogeneity wanes, what will it mean in twenty years to be “American?”⁵

Beyond the social ramifications, the economics provoke many in homogeneous communities to near panic. While it is true that the existence of undocumented immigrant populations living in the United States comes at some cost to taxpayers, there are also economic benefits as a result of their presence. Jeffrey Carroll of the Pew Research Center cites two of these benefits: the sustaining of the Social Security system, and the growing need for employees in the service industry. In both cases, resolving the complications of undocumented immigrants is a win-win as it simultaneously addresses these foreseeable economic trends.⁶

In their 2013 report to the UN General Assembly High Level Dialogue, the International Organization of Migration (IOM) shared the following recommendations as steps forward in immigration issues:

1. **Improve public perceptions of migrants.** IOM verbalizes the need to acknowledge “the important role migrants can and do play as partners in host and home country development.” A shift in public perception is a proactive attempt to “avoid discrimination, xenophobia and violence against immigrants.”⁷
2. **Factor migration into development planning.** As this phenomenon grows at local, national and global levels, responsible planning will allow the issue to be made “public and visible,” and lead to “bilateral cooperation, especially through dialogue.”⁸

³ Population Division of DESA (Dept. of Economic and Social Affairs, *Report of the Secretary-General on International Migration and Development*, 9.

⁴ Passel, “Unauthorized Immigrants.”

⁵ Carroll, *Christians at the Border*, 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 29–30.

⁷ International Organization of Migration, *IOM Position Paper*, 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

3. **Protect the rights of migrants.** This includes the implementation of national laws to protect the rights of all migrants including: equitable pay, social security benefits, health policies, support for families and positive policy changes.⁹
4. **Manage migration in crisis situations.** Disaster preparedness can help facilitate post-crisis recovery and advanced planning for migrants during times of humanitarian crises.¹⁰
5. **Enhance evidence building and knowledge-based policymaking on migration.** Improving the quality of research and collection of data related to migrants and migration will better inform policy makers.¹¹
6. **Promote policy coherence and institutional development.** Encouraging accountability through regular dialogue and cooperation will result in relevant and effective policy changes.¹²

While this research and data related to the issue of migrants and migration is hardly exhaustive, there are more significant questions that still need to be addressed. Even with global statistics and trends at our Google fingertips, Daniel Carroll, author of *Christians at the Border*, reminds the Church of the biblical model of hospitality and the shepherding voice whispering into the ear of the Church:

An appropriate response to the complicated situation in society will not come from detached, objective analysis, cost-benefit calculations, efficiency quotients, and cultural arguments. The decisions that are made and courses of action that are recommended should be commensurate with the life of Jesus – his actions, his teaching, his cross. Analysis and calculations are necessary, but they must be informed by more transcendent beliefs and other overriding life commitments.¹³

In response to Carroll’s poignant words, the Church must decide whose voice to listen to and obey. There are political, social and economic voices from every culture chattering, attempting to drown out the quiet whisper of the incarnate Christ. As people appointed by God to carry out the mission of God through the Holy Spirit, we must choose to listen to the voice of the “Good Shepherd.”¹⁴

The Incarnational Model and the Eucharist

Oscar Muriu, Senior Pastor of Nairobi Chapel in Kenya, addressed hundreds of young adults at Urbana 2009. In his keynote address he shares these words regarding the quiet way God chose to reveal God’s self to us.

If I were God I would not have sent Jesus as a baby! If I were God, I would have been in a hurry to save humanity...at his entry CNN would have recorded it

⁹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 7.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Carroll, *Christians at the Border*, 133.

¹⁴ The Holy Bible, *John 10:11 (ESV)*.

live...I would have reached the world at once...So stunned would the world have been, that salvation would have come in a mere few weeks and I may not even have *needed* a cross. But I am not God. You see God's way was quiet and subtle and subversive and therefore God's way won and changed humanity...God's way was the way of incarnation...a different way, a slow, gracious, dangerous and difficult way.¹⁵

The incarnational model of the Christ child begs us to constrain our inclination to live hurried, homogeneous lives that can overwhelm and isolate us from others. In contrast, the incarnational model teaches us to embrace the life-giving practices of Jesus Christ and the early church, as we dwell among others in gracious and subtle ways that at times, can be dangerous and difficult. One of the most formational practices introduced by Christ and applied in the early church was the practice of hospitality.

There are many methods through which we express hospitality: listening attentively, providing a comfortable place to rest, attending to medical needs or offering financial assistance; but perhaps more than any of these methods, we express hospitality most often through a shared meal. In most every culture, sharing a meal together communicates relationship, care, and sincere concern for another person. We exist in family units and in communities where we experience shared meals regularly.

In Luke 14, Jesus instructs his listeners to exchange their cultural values for kingdom values in relation to hospitality. In an exchange of homogeneity for heterogeneity, they are told to send their dinner invitations to the marginalized of society rather than to their friends, or their neighbors, or the rich. Christine Pohl shares,

In [Jesus'] table fellowship, he challenges cultural assumptions about who is welcome in the community and in the kingdom. Jesus identifies himself with the stranger and sick such that ministry to them is ministry to him (Matthew 25:31-46).¹⁶

In her journal article entitled, *Welcoming the Stranger: Christian Models of Hospitality as Justice*, Christine Pohl shares that for a substantive part of the history of the Christian tradition, table fellowship or hospitality was the context in which Christians focused their attention to issues of human dignity, overcoming social diversity and breaking social boundaries, which they found left strangers and immigrants in the margins of society. "This rich moral tradition can help to shape a theological framework for contemporary concerns about inclusion and difference."¹⁷

In Luke 22, as Jesus institutes Eucharist into the life of his disciples and into the life of the Church, he sets into motion a means of grace for all of humanity regardless of cultural or social identifiers. As the disciples are welcomed into relationship with the Triune God through

¹⁵ InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, *Oscar Muriu - Urbana 09*.

¹⁶ Pohl, "Welcoming the Stranger: Christian Models of Hospitality as Justice."

¹⁷ Ibid.

the symbol of Christ's suffering, they are seen by God and are invited to exist in a place of inclusion and belonging, but also a place where differences cohabit, a place of heterogeneity. After a few weeks had passed in the lives of the disciples, this means of grace found expression through the Church, living in the context of the kingdom of God.

What is the relation between the Eucharist and the practice of hospitality? Daniel Carroll shares,

The Lord's Supper, so central a symbol of the Christian faith and so important for nurturing the remembrance of the person and work of Jesus, was inseparable from the practice of hospitality...to come periodically to the Table, yet without a commitment to kindness and openness to others, is to not do justice to its purpose and spirit.¹⁸

As we move from observing the practices of the early church to the words of John Wesley, we see this same sentiment shared. Table fellowship or communion within the Church grown out of communion with God, must be offered openly. Any other form of table fellowship is a perversion of the purpose and Spirit of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

Wesleyan hospitality: Embodied and Reciprocal

Who is a stranger? How has the Church responded to immigrants in the history of the Wesleyan and broader Christian tradition? What is hospitality and why was it crucial to the Church? How are the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic marks of the Church formed in the practice of hospitality? Pohl shares this definition of the stranger,

Strangers, in the strict sense, are those who are disconnected from basic relationships that give persons a secure place in the world. The most vulnerable strangers are detached from family, community, church, work, and polity...when we offer hospitality to strangers, we welcome them into a place to which we are somehow connected.¹⁹

John Wesley's theology and ecclesiology were woven through his practice of hospitality to the sick, although not in the strict understanding we might have of hospitality *or* of the sick. From his sermon entitled, *Visiting the Sick* (1786),

First, I would inquire, what is the nature of this duty? What is implied in 'visiting the sick'? 1. By the sick I do not mean only those that keep their bed, or that are sick in the strictest sense. Rather I would include all such as are in a state of affliction, whether of mind or body; and that whether they are good or bad, whether they fear God or not. [2.] 'But is there need of visiting them in person?

¹⁸ Carroll, *Christians at the Border*, 121.

¹⁹ Pohl, *Making Room*, 13.

May we not relieve them at a distance? Does it not answer the same purpose if we send them help as if we carry it ourselves?’²⁰

Wesley continues by insisting that our attending to the needs of others is impossible through proxy, rather it demands our physical presence. The exchange that takes place in practicing hospitality with the stranger is not one-directional. A traditional understanding of hospitality is to participate in the spiritual practice of welcoming others into the comfort and warmth of food and rest, recognizing others as equals in companionship. However, hospitality is not only offered but is also received; it is a reciprocal enterprise.

From his own works, John Wesley shares more about going into the homes of others than having them into his home, perhaps because of the nature of his work as an itinerant preacher or perhaps because of his intentionality in visiting the poor where they were. “Because of his travels and extraordinary preaching schedule, and his emphasis on face-to-face discipleship, Wesley was continually visiting, always as a guest.”²¹

According to Wesley, reciprocity takes place as the one who offers hospitality increases in “lowliness, in patience, in tenderness of Spirit, in sympathy with the afflicted which you might not have gained...”²² The spiritual formation that takes root within us grows holiness as we practice hospitality. As we participate in this practice, the marks of the Church begin to surface: one, holy, catholic, apostolic. Wesley compels us to see others, “with your own eyes...if you do not, you lose a means of grace...”²³

*****On December 21, 2014, I decided to take Wesley’s words to heart. That day I saw with my own eyes these faces and listened with my own ears to the stories of these strangers that I worship alongside each week at Central Church of the Nazarene in Lenexa, KS. We gathered together for a shared meal and after we finished eating I conducted an ethnographic interview with a small group of immigrants. Some of their names and faces were familiar to me, others were not, but after sharing in table fellowship, we came together in a small room on a Sunday afternoon, their Spanish conversations buzzing and laughter still ringing as I began to embody this practice of hospitality.***

I asked if they would describe what they had experienced when they first arrived to the United States. Their responses brought an immediate quietness to the room,

“We were fearful.”²⁴

“I felt mistreated.”²⁵

²⁰ Collins and Vickers, *The Sermons of John Wesley*.

²¹ Pohl, “Practicing Hospitality in the Face of ‘Complicated Wickedness,’” 20.

²² Collins and Vickers, *The Sermons of John Wesley*.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Anonymous, *Undocumented Immigrants: Ethnographic Interviews*.

²⁵ Ibid.

“Loneliness was huge. I was always looking over my shoulder, afraid of the cops...I was frustrated and helpless.”²⁶

“Language was a big deal.”²⁷

Some of them shared their experiences of suffering and mistreatment and as we listened, we all shook our heads in disbelief and sadness.

“I was working labor at a person’s house. The lady was nice; she gave me a glass of water. Her mother was there and saw what she did. She came over to me and took the glass of water right out of my hand.”²⁸

As the conversation continued, another shared with me that they had all suffered in some way, but that there were driving reasons to stay in spite of their suffering. A married couple shared their story with us as their teenage son was sitting by their side,

We want our family here, it is a much better life. The economy is better, there are no gangs or crime...that is why we stay. We came here from El Salvador. Our son was being recruited by a gang. He was told he would have to kidnap children; that was his job in the gang. We knew we had to leave – for our son’s sake.²⁹

Voluntary Ignorance and the Power of Recognition

There is a shared concern among those who suffer, that ignorance is a choice and at times, a preference. Wesley’s sermon, *Visiting the Sick (1786)*, helps to verbalize what he calls “voluntary ignorance.”

According to the common observation, one part of the world does not know what the other suffers. Many of them do not know, because they do not care to know: they keep out of the way of knowing it— and then plead their voluntary ignorance as an excuse for their hardness of heart. ‘Indeed, sir’ (said a person of large substance), ‘I am a very compassionate man. But to tell you the truth, I do not know anybody in the world that is in want.’ How did this come to pass? Why, he took good care to keep out of their way. And if he fell upon any of them unawares, ‘he passed over on the other side.’³⁰

As the needs of undocumented immigrants bear in upon the peripheral vision of the Church we *cannot* succumb to voluntary ignorance. The church must acknowledge and bring

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Collins and Vickers, *The Sermons of John Wesley*.

under God’s sovereignty what Pohl describes as the “power of recognition.”³¹ The French religious philosopher, Simone Weil, articulates her own thoughts with regard to “genius” or knowledge in her letters to Father Perrin documented in *Waiting for God*. Weil compels us to pray for genius continually,

...It is the first thing we have to ask for now; we have to ask for it daily, hourly, as a famished child constantly asks for bread. The world needs saints who have genius, just as a plague-stricken town needs doctors. *Where there is a need there is also an obligation.*³²

As the Church embraces her missional and holy nature, Weil implores us furthermore to be full of knowledge and saintliness. As the Church is empowered by God to recognize the suffering of others in need, the Church is also obligated to respond with justice.

Words of suffering and of hope

What are the needs of those suffering as immigrants and how is the Church already responding? These were some of the pressing questions I had for my Spanish-speaking brothers and sisters at Central Church. After asking them how the church had responded to them, their answers began to reveal the work of the Holy Spirit within our church.

“Even though all week outside we are rejected, here we are accepted.”³³

“Before the eyes of God, we are all the same. That is why we came to *this* church. We feel the unity in *this* church.”³⁴

“This church is kind to us and to our children.”³⁵

They also expressed the ways in which they continue to suffer and how the Church might still respond. “There are still barriers, even in the church. Another way the church can help us is to find jobs.”³⁶

The people in the church need to learn the immigration laws, then they can help. Ignorance is not an excuse. This church is big enough – perhaps there are one or two lawyers who could advise us on immigration issues, they could give guidance and we would be willing to pay.³⁷

³¹ Pohl, *Making Room*.

³² Weil, *Waiting for God*, 51. (Italics added).

³³ Anonymous, Undocumented Immigrants: Ethnographic Interviews.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

“Let us just be one like Christ, as God calls us to be one. Americans, even Christians, haven’t spent time with us. All they see is what is on T.V. that we are lazy and we want to take jobs. We are people who serve the Lord!”³⁸

Beyond the needs of jobs and counsel for immigration law there are spiritual barriers felt by these co-laborers in Christ. “How can I fulfill a call to be a missionary or a pastor if I don’t have a Driver’s License? We are not spiritually free because we are not free to explore our call.” Those last words stung as they came from the heart of my friend *Maria who teaches Sunday School each week to this faithful congregation. As we closed our time together, I reassured them that I would share their words with the leadership of our church and find ways to communicate their needs to the larger community of faith.

Treading new waters

The Church of the Nazarene continues to move forward with a biblical response to the issue of immigration facing the global Church. One step toward this biblical response came from a statement issued by the National Association of Evangelicals, of which the Church of the Nazarene is a member and is summarized as follows:

- Immigrants should be treated with respect and mercy.
- National borders must be safeguarded with efficiency and respect for human dignity
- Immigration laws should recognize the central importance of the family and provide for reduction in backlogs for family reunification.
- There should be a clear and workable system for legally admitting an adequate number of immigrants to meet both workforce and family reunification needs.
- There must be a sound, equitable process for currently undocumented immigrants who wish to assume the responsibilities and privileges of citizenship to earn legal status.
- There should be fair labor and civil laws for all who reside in the United States, reflecting the best of our nation’s heritage.
- Immigration enforcement must recognize due process of law, the sanctity of the human person and the incomparable value of family.³⁹

Addressing issues of immigration require more than words; our actions convey our beliefs and convictions. In addition to this statement offered by the NAE and supported by the Church of the Nazarene, our denomination has recently contributed to a new, collaborative initiative called The Immigration Alliance (TIA).

On November 7, 2014, TIA’s executive director, Damon Schroeder wrote to our Board of General Superintendents to thank the Church of the Nazarene as an endorser for this coalition

³⁸ Ibid.

* Connotes use of pseudonym.

³⁹ National Association of Evangelicals, “Immigration 2009.”

which will bring together fifteen evangelical organizations and denominations. Nazarene pastors Rev. Althea Taylor and Rev. Gabriel Salguero are representatives on TIA's Board of Directors. Their Church-Based Immigrant Ministry Coalition implementation plan includes practical tools to help churches meet the needs of those congregants who require legal services. Their mission statement reads:

The Immigration Alliance is a national effort that equips churches to provide critical immigration legal services to under-resourced immigrants. TIA's affiliated churches provide fair, trustworthy immigration legal counsel to include:

- Low-cost legal counseling on immigration-related matters
- Support in determining eligibility for benefits
- Assistance in preparing applications for legal immigration status
- Immigration support to victims of crime and domestic violence
- Assistance in reuniting families⁴⁰

Our denomination's participation in this practical expression of our theological and biblical foundations is another mark of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. The unified effort of the missional Church is observed as we move from the place of belonging within the community of faith. From our own table fellowship of homogeneity, we cross boundaries of difference to engage with strangers and immigrants and our actions reflect holiness through reciprocal acts of hospitality.

A preferred future for the Church of the Nazarene

John Wesley articulates a vision of holiness, the missional church and immigration in his sermon titled, *The Catholic Spirit*. In speaking of the man or woman who is found in the community of faith and in communion with the Triune God, Wesley shares,

While he is united by the tenderest and closest ties to one particular congregation, --his heart is enlarged toward all mankind, those he knows and those he does not; he embraces with strong and cordial affection neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies. This is catholic or universal love. And he that has this is of a catholic spirit.⁴¹

Wesley's vision is my own preferred future for the Church of the Nazarene, that we, as members of one body, being found in holy communion with the Triune Godhead and with each other, turn our eyes outward upon the faces of both friends and strangers and invite them in to a place of belonging. However, my preferred future does not end there. I envision the Church as people who have moved out of a place of comfort, away from their human nature's desire to remain in homogeneity into a place of diversity where we walk alongside others, strangers even, on the path. Nell Becker Sweeden, Assistant Professor of Theology at George Fox Evangelical Seminary shares in her forthcoming book,

⁴⁰ "The Immigration Alliance: Providing High Quality, Low Cost Legal Services to Immigrants."

⁴¹ Wesley, "The Catholic Spirit: Sermon 39."

The church is drawn into Christ-like beauty through the poor and despised of the world. In this way, while ecclesial communities in North America need to learn what it means to accompany the migrants, such communities are also in desperate need of the accompaniment of migrants on this journey.⁴²

I believe that there is a growing hunger that exists today within the Church and across generational and cultural boundaries. It is a holy longing, “for a richer understanding of what it means to be the church in the world”⁴³ As the global Church begins to emerge in new paradigm, a clarion call is indispensable for the Church to embrace a biblical and theological vision of the peaceable kingdom of God that welcomes the stranger. If this holy longing bears fruit, the Church catholic may enthusiastically embrace its identity as sojourners, pilgrim people journeying together toward the eschaton and in step with the Spirit. This hope is realized within the Church as those who move us beyond a homogeneous identity, accompany us along the way. This reality gives the global Church reason to celebrate as we find ourselves returning to our hopeful identity and purpose, bearing the marks of the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church.

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⁴² Sweeden, “Eucharist as Gift in God’s Economy of Grace: Explorations in Hospitality and Pilgrimage in Relation to Global Migration.”

⁴³ Marsh and Perkins, *Welcoming Justice*, 93.

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