

RESPONSE TO KATHY MOWRY'S "ONLY ONE FOOT IN EXILE"

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I want to thank Kathy for her insightful and reflective presentation on the current state of North American congregations. For purposes of this response, I assume that "North American congregations" refers to the USA/Canada congregations, and does not include Mexico, although as we know, in geo-political terms, Mexico is also an integral part of North America.

I agree with Kathy that the situation of the USA/Canada congregations "is not the same as that of the Israelites arriving in Babylon. We have never made a clear departure; we have never been truly dispossessed or stripped bare." The comparison of the USA/Canada church in "exile" is relative. As Kathy states: "While it is possible to say that the church is feeling marginalized in our culture or that congregations are experiencing marginalization in their communities, it is important to realize that this marginalization is still relative."

The use of the "exile" metaphor, it seems has to do with the growing "post Christian" cultural reality of these two North American countries, which is profoundly affecting the church as we know it. The rapid decline of membership, attendance, contributions, and other forms of participation in congregational life, are forcing the church to look for biblical applications to explain its present reality.

I think it would be helpful for the USA/Canada churches to re-read the Gospel narratives and the book of Acts to see the life and experiences of the early Church as a minority in a dominant Greco/Roman culture and under the rule of the Roman Empire. Clearly, from its earliest beginnings the Church of Jesus Christ has not depended on cultural acceptance to fulfill its mission. In fact, Jesus alerted his disciples to the cost of discipleship that would include marginalization, suffering, and persecution. "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world. (John 16:33-34)

Throughout history the Church has been in tension with popular culture. There have been periods of time when the church has enjoyed the privilege, power, and acceptance of the larger culture and society. H. Richard Niebuhr in his book "Christ and Culture" helps the Church to understand the cultural tension of its time. Paul Hutchinson in the New York Times Book Review of "Christ and Culture" summarizes Niebuhr's treatment of the subject as: "A . . . piece of analytical writing . . . tackling what is just about the toughest problem faced by Christians. The problem: In what way, or degree, is Christ relevant to the situation in which the Christian must live. . . "

A significant factor in the present-day USA/Canada church context, is the sector of the growing immigrant church. Kathy refers to the people who comprise these congregations when she states: ". . . our feelings of being marginalized are nothing compared to the marginalization of the poor or those from certain ethnic groups, who understand marginalization in more profound ways."

Particularly in recent decades, the world has experienced continuous massive migrations of people from different world areas; migrations caused by war, natural disasters, social injustice, persecutions and socio economic imbalances. Many of the immigrants of the world have arrived in the USA and Canada. Some of these immigrants have come from Christian countries to seek refuge in these two North American countries. The vast majority of them can be said to have both feet in “exile”; having been forced to leave their countries, possessions, cultures and even sometimes their families. Experiences of marginalization are part of their new reality.

Sometimes these Christians and their ethnic congregations feel doubly marginalized: first by the dominant culture and also by their host Christian family as they interface in church relation environments. The immigrant congregations feel that often they don’t have a place at the table where the decisions are made. The immigrant church is under-represented in many of our institutions even though a significant membership growth among them has taken place in the last three decades. More than 20% of the Nazarene congregations in the USA/Canada are non-white.

*Dr. Tom G. Nees in his book *The Changing Face of the Church*, referring to immigrant and historic minorities in the United States and Canada states: “the church is under-represented in all these historic minority groups. It may be that these immigrants. . . will become bridge people, helping, perhaps forcing, the church to become more inclusive”¹*

We in the immigrant church have looked for a biblical anchor to understand our reality in “exile”. We have embraced the Word of Jehovah to the captives in Babylon: “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters: Increase in number there; do not decrease.” (Jer. 29:5-6) The immigrant church has appropriated this word from the Lord to Jeremiah for the Israelites in their existence within a new cultural context of captivity.

The immigrant church also sees its role in “exile” to be faithful to Jesus’ mandate to his Church to be witnesses in proclaiming the Good News as was the Jerusalem church in the book of Acts.

“The Jerusalem Church became an immigrant church. God often uses immigrants to spread the gospel. When “. . . a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem . . . all except the apostles were scattered.” (Acts 8:1 NIV) 2

As churches in a post Christian society with “only one foot in exile”, to use Kathy’s terminology, it may be helpful to focus on the following:

1. To be the Church of Jesus Christ in in spite of the feeling of exile or marginalization. “. . . on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” (Mt. 16:18)

¹ Thomas G. Nees, *The Changing Face of the Church: From American to Global* (Kansas City, MO.: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1997), 13.

2. Jerry Porter, *The Immigrant Among US* (May/June 2012 Holiness Today, Draft #2)

3. All Scriptures quotations are from the NIV.

2. To learn from the gospel narratives and history to be kingdom minded rather than Christian culture minded. “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind . . .” (Rom. 12:2)
3. To partner with the immigrant church in establishing the reign of God, “Shalom” in our communities. “Two are better than one because they have a good return for their work.” (Ecclesiastes 4:9)
4. To learn to be salt and light, from the example of the global church, whose vast majority of members don’t have acceptance, influence or power. (Mt. 5:13-14)

Finally, all of us together as God’s people would do well to consider the words of Revelation 2:5 to the church at Ephesus: “Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first . . .” May God grants us a return to our first love and a new vision of how to be faithful to God’s mission in our time.