

# MISSION IN A STRANGE LAND

*Cathy Ross\**

## **Introduction**

In this paper I am indebted to Professor Mbiti whose work was invaluable to me as a preparation to living and working in Rwanda, Congo and Uganda.

Preparing this paper has caused me to reflect on issues of home, identity, migration, hospitality, strangeness, otherness, and Christianity in a strange land. This contribution will be a personal one – I am not an expert on the issues of African diaspora. I have lived in Africa in the countries mentioned above and I have enjoyed reading books and articles by Harvey Kwiyani, Babatunde Adedibu, Chigor Chike, Afe Adegame and others on this subject and I commend them to you. Clearly, I cannot write as a person of the African diaspora and I hesitate to comment on the experiences, joys and challenges in that respect. But I will offer some thoughts and reflections (and many questions) from my perspective and try to make some connections; others may of course make completely different connections and meanings from what I offer.

Firstly I would like to reflect on identity as a migrant. I myself am a migrant; from my accent, most people assume I am from Australia. I am not! I am from Aotearoa, New Zealand. Why does that annoy and upset me so much that people make that common mistake? Sometimes I actually feel quite enraged by it. Why? Does it matter?

I suspect others may have had similar experiences; perhaps it is assumed that a person is simply from Africa without differentiating all the different African countries and therefore both the person and the whole continent is homogenised!

I now have dual nationality; I have both UK and Kiwi passports. I sat the citizenship test and used to know such things as how many hours 12 year olds are allowed to work on Sundays, when Hogmanay is celebrated, and that the UK football team is not important to the people of the UK because

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there is no such thing as the UK football team! This was a trick question! My two most intimidating and literally sweat-inducing experiences were my two visits to the Home Office in Lunar House in Croydon to extend my visa. Eventually, four years ago, after living here for six years, I was grateful to receive my UK passport – no more dealings with the Home Office. I am now a citizen of the UK. Is this now home? Well . . . yes. Where is home? Home is where my family is. Where are my family? My children are here, my extended family (parents, in-laws, cousins, aunts, uncles, etc.) are in New Zealand. So where exactly is home?

Recently, an Englishman told me that he thought if I had become a citizen of the UK and really wanted to be at home here and belong to this country, then I should give up my NZ citizenship, to which I immediately replied that if I had had to do that, then I would not have taken on British nationality. Later, as I reflected on this uncomfortable encounter and challenge, I asked myself why it so important that I am and remain a New Zealander and that I insist on that, while at the same time wanting to adopt British nationality? Surely my identity lies in being a child of God and ultimately it does not really matter whether I am British or Kiwi.

I think it does matter. God, in wisdom and goodness, has created us British, Kiwi, Kenyan, Nigerian, Ghanaian, Ugandan, Malawian, etc. For good or for ill, our homeland, or native country, is important. It has shaped and formed us, nurtured us or possibly scarred us. It may be a place we remember with yearning and longing or it may be a place we were glad to leave behind, but it has shaped us.

So our particularity does matter. The incarnation is a testimony to this. God became a human being at a particular time and place, in a particular culture. Migration is a good way to understand the incarnation as Jesus crossed borders to be incarnate among us. God enters the human condition – that broken and sinful territory – in order to help us find our way home to God, our ultimate home. One of the paradoxes of the incarnation is that while human migration may tend towards upward mobility (although not always; there are millions of forced migrants and displaced peoples), divine migration was about downward mobility (Phil: 2: 5–11).

“Scripture depicts the movement of a people toward a promised land, but God’s movement is just the opposite; it is an immersion into those territories of human life that are deprived of life and prosperity.”<sup>1</sup> And so the incarnation challenges much of the current rhetoric around migration because the incarnation and the cross are a challenge and are offensive to many contemporary values in society. Groody reminds us, “It [the incarnation] offends precisely because it brings into question the disordered values of a society that has lost its sense of *imago Dei* . . . The incarnation moves people beyond

1 Daniel Groody, “Crossing the Divide: Foundations of a Theology of Migration and Refugees,” Crowther Centre Monograph, March 2010, 17.

a narrow, self-serving identity into a greater identification with those considered ‘other’ in society . . .”<sup>2</sup>

Whatever one’s nationality status, whether a permanent resident, on a temporary visa, with adopted citizenship, or British-born, many people are migrants of one sort or another; and of course all are pilgrims, as this earth is not our final destination. The pilgrim-migrant spectrum is an interesting one to reflect on as all are somewhere on that spectrum.

The problem with national identity arises if we elevate it above our relationship with God in Christ and with one another as pilgrims. A central dimension of Jesus’ mission is that of reconciliation, which challenges our tendencies to idolise state, nationality, religion or a particular ideology. All these can be used as forces to exclude or alienate, and of course, ultimately we are citizens of another Kingdom which has already begun here and now. We are sojourners and pilgrims, new creations in Jesus Christ, and whose citizenship is in heaven. This understanding is a challenge to move beyond an identity based on narrow national or geographical definitions and holds out the possibilities of more expansive, spiritual understandings and definitions. It is also a challenge to let go of any forms of ideological, political, social or religious provincialism and invites us to live in a world shaped by God’s mission.

But what does all this mean in the meantime? We live in the meantime – in the already but not yet – the Kingdom of God is here but not yet in its fullness. How do we live as migrants, pilgrims and foreigners in this strange land? What gifts do we bring? I would like to consider a few polarities here: insider/outsider or resident alien; guest/host; single/multiethnic. I would like to look at this positively; that as migrants and citizens we can bring gifts and offer something positive to the country in which we currently live.

### **Insider/outsider**

Whether guests, exiles, migrants, sojourners or citizens, this is where God has placed us to live for God’s glory at this time and place. Those at this conference are uniquely placed in this regard; for most here know that we are outsiders; this is not our native country and context; even those born in Britain have been exposed to cultures and contexts, longings and aspirations, that come from other lands. However, many, including myself, who have been here for some time, may consider themselves both insiders and outsiders at the same time and that gives a particular location and perspective to the culture and context.

Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, in an excellent essay entitled “Letting Go and Speaking Out: Prophetic Dialogue and the Spirituality of Inculturation,” remind us that “the outsider has to practice a particular form

2 Groody, “Crossing the Divide,” 19.

of spirituality that revolves around the asceticism of ‘letting go’<sup>3</sup> so that we, as outsiders, do not hinder the expression of a genuinely contextualised expression of the faith. This will mean really listening and being attentive so that we can begin to understand this culture and context. Listening and attentiveness are hard work. Good listening requires humility, vulnerability, availability, receptivity and patience. Being a good listener means being attentive. Attention and attentiveness are absolutely necessary for outsiders.

Attentiveness to context also requires the gift of sight. Bevans and Schroeder quote a Ghanaian proverb, “the stranger has eyes like saucers, but doesn’t see anything!” We also need the gift of sight. This is a gift of the Holy Spirit, as John Taylor reminds us.<sup>4</sup> The Holy Spirit is the ‘Go-Between God’ who opens our inward eyes and makes us aware of the other. “The Holy Spirit is that power which opens eyes that are closed, hearts that are unaware and minds that shrink from too much reality.”<sup>5</sup> An example is the Good Samaritan who refused to pass by or pretend that he had not *seen* the wounded man. His compassionate actions crossed ethnic boundaries, caused him personal cost and inconvenience and saved a life. When we see the other person, we see the image of God, as well as our common humanity, which establishes a fundamental dignity, respect and common bond. And of course, it is interesting for us to note that the Good Samaritan was the outsider in that story – he was not a member of the native culture.

Bevans and Schroeder offer a further challenge:

Outsiders need to let go of their certainties regarding the content of the gospel. They need to let go of cherished ideas and practices that have nourished and sustained them in their own journeys toward Christian maturity. They need to let go of the symbols that anchor them in their human and Christian identity and let go of the order that makes them comfortable.<sup>6</sup>

Bevans and Schroeder are North Americans, writing from a particular location in the world normally associated with power, status and affluence. In writing this, they probably had in mind mission from the West to the Rest. The dynamics are different here in the UK – sometimes known as mission in reverse (an expression with colonial overtones) or “The Empire Bites Back.” Different power dynamics are at work when Africans who come to live in the UK engage in mission; it is very different from the days of the British Empire; there is not the complicated and ambiguous relationship with

3 Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue, Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011), 91.

4 John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God, The Holy Spirit and Christian Mission* (London: SCM, 1975), 19

5 Taylor, *The Go-Between God*, 19.

6 Bevans and Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, 92.

colonial authorities, the territorial and one-directional approach to mission, the support of parachurch structures, the perceived attitudes of cultural superiority. Africans offer a focus on spiritual power, a strong belief in the supernatural, a moral and ethical conservatism, a clear belief in the authority of the Scriptures, a sensibility towards injustice and a communal apprehension and realisation of the Christian faith. These may be gifts and fresh insights that can help us to reimagine not only the Christian faith in Britain, but also the place of Britain within world Christianity.

However, letting go is a challenge for those who are not native to this culture and context. What understandings and practices of the faith have we brought with us that we might need to let go for the sake of spreading and embedding the gospel in this context? What exactly are our sacred cows? Each one will be able to think of things from his or her own particular culture and context; but here I will quote some of Harvey Kwiyani's ideas. He states that many African Christians find it hard to make their church cultures open to Westerners:

While there is great passion and fervour in the way most Africans pray and minister, the impact can also be lost in translation. For instance, most Africans are used to worship services that take two to three hours. For many Westerners who are used to shorter worship services, this is a huge barrier [ . . . ]. Many African immigrant ministers preach their long sermons in a very African style – spiced with vernacular jokes and delivered with shouting and sweating. Most Westerners who appreciate shorter, well-prepared sermons delivered in a talk/presentation style find these African tendencies offputting. Africans end up raising barriers to their own effectiveness – barriers that separate insiders from outsiders.<sup>7</sup>

Bevans and Schroeder then go on to challenge insiders in a particular culture to listen and speak out from their own cultural context.

Even more than outsiders, insiders need to develop the skills of really seeing and listening to the culture. What is needed is to develop a kind of 'x-ray vision' by which they can begin to see the ways that God is present and active in their situation, and the values in their culture or context that might even add to the entire church's understanding of the gospel.<sup>8</sup>

So what might British insiders claim are gospel values found in this culture? And what might we, as semi-insiders, want to offer to the culture? One idea

7 Harvey C. Kwiyani, *Sent Forth, African Missionary Work in the West* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2014), 151.

8 Bevans and Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue*, 96.

that strikes me is the longing for community. African cultures are well known for the concept of *ubuntu*: I am because we are. How does that mesh with a British understanding of community? What sort of fusion could we create there?

Another way of looking at this might be to think of ourselves as ‘resident-alien’, a term that is picked up in 1 Peter. Being a resident-alien can allow for insider and outsider status simultaneously and can offer both dialogical and prophetic approaches. It may also be a more inclusive way of considering this. Emma Wild-Wood writes, “Exploring the idea that we are strangers together in the world, however short or long we may have lived in a particular nation, may allow us to think beyond the categories of migrant, native, guest, host with which we often live.”<sup>9</sup> I believe that a resident-alien spirituality does require that outsiders’ experiences and practices of the Christian faith are heard and appreciated and, where possible, find a place in the life of the church. Being a resident-alien may not always be comfortable but it will be a reminder of our pilgrim status. Perhaps a resident-alien spirituality will be a more attractive and winsome approach to mission if it can model humble listening and attentiveness to culture and context, reconciliation, compassion, and openness to difference.

### Guest/host

The whole guest/host conundrum is a fascinating study for Christian mission. Who is the guest and who is the host? This very question is demonstrated and incarnated in the life of Jesus.

Jesus is portrayed as a gracious host, welcoming children, tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners into his presence, and therefore offending those who would prefer such guests not be at his gatherings. But Jesus is also portrayed as a vulnerable guest and a needy stranger who came to his own but his own did not receive him (Jn. 1:11). Pohl comments that this “intermingling of guest and host roles in the person of Jesus is part of what makes the story of hospitality so compelling for Christians.”<sup>10</sup> Think of Jesus on the Emmaus Road as a travelling pilgrim and stranger, recognised as host and who he was in the breaking of bread during a meal involving an act of hospitality. Or think of the Peter and Cornelius story (interestingly, another story involving varieties of food) – who is the host and who is the guest? Who is the insider and who is the outsider? Both offer and receive; both listen and learn; both are challenged and changed by the hospitality of the other. So we can see the importance not only of the ambiguity but also the fluidity and reciprocity/mutuality of the host/guest conundrum. We offer and receive as

9 Emma Wild-Wood, “Mission, Ecclesiology and Migration,” in *Mission on the Road to Emmaus, Constants, Context and Prophetic Dialogue*, eds., Stephen Bevans and Cathy Ross (London: SCM, 2015), 64.

10 Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Eedrmans: Grand Rapids, 1999), 17.

both guest or stranger and host. In fact, strangers may actually enhance our well-being rather than diminish it. The three major festivals of the church – Christmas, Easter and Pentecost – all have to do with the advent of a divine stranger. In each case this stranger – a baby, a resurrected Christ and the wind of the Holy Spirit – meets us as a mysterious or strange visitor or guest, breaking into our world, challenging our worldviews and systems, and welcoming us to new worlds.<sup>11</sup>

Quaker scholar and educationalist, Parker Palmer, provides a reminder of the importance of the stranger in his intriguing book, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life*. Our spiritual pilgrimage is a quest, a venture into the unknown, away from safety and security into strange places for if we remain where we are, we have no need of faith. The visitors to Abraham and Sarah and the stranger on the Emmaus Road brought new truths to their lives. According to Palmer, we need the stranger. In his view, “the stranger is not simply one who needs us. We need the stranger. We need the stranger if we are to know Christ and serve God, in truth and in love.”<sup>12</sup> For him hospitality is:

inviting the stranger into our private space, whether that be the space of our own home or the space of our personal awareness and concern. And when we do, some important transformations occur. Our private space is suddenly enlarged; no longer tight, cramped, restricted, but open and expansive and free. And our space may also be illumined . . . Hospitality to the stranger gives us a chance to see our own lives afresh, through different eyes.<sup>13</sup>

So the stranger, the other, becomes a person of promise. The stranger may be unsettling; the stranger may challenge or provoke us; the stranger may provide a wider perspective. Remember the injunction from the book of Hebrews, “Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it” (Heb. 13:2). Strangers save us from cosy domesticity and force us out of our comfort zones. Strangers may transform and challenge us. “Hospitality to the stranger gives us a chance to see our own lives afresh, through different eyes.”<sup>14</sup>

This is where the idea of hospitality as a metaphor for mission is so powerful. Israel experienced God as a God of Hospitality. Stories of hospitality are foundational to their very existence and identity. These stories of

11 See John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality, Partnership with Strangers as Promise of Mission* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 5.

12 Parker Palmer, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life* (NY: Crossroad, 1986), 131.

13 Palmer, *The Company of Strangers*, 132.

14 Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality*, 6.



hospitality contain themes and tensions which resonate through the centuries – stories of hospitality received and hospitality abused. The well-known story of Abraham and Sarah welcoming three strangers brought them good news and bad in the context of their hospitality. The guests confirmed they would have a son in their old age but they also warned Abraham of the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Hospitality was considered an important duty and often we see the hosts becoming beneficiaries of their guests and strangers. So Abraham and Sarah entertained angels in Gen 18; the widow of Zarephath benefited from Elijah’s visit (I Kings 17); and Rahab and her family were saved from death by welcoming Joshua’s spies (Josh 2). Pohl remarks in her superb book on hospitality, *Making Room, Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, “The first formative story of the biblical tradition on hospitality is unambiguously positive about welcoming strangers.”<sup>15</sup>

So what does this mean for us? Are we guest or host? Are we strangers to be welcomed or hosts offering hospitality? And of course, this is where hospitality as a metaphor for mission becomes so intriguing and compelling:

Hospitality questions one’s way of thinking about oneself and the other as belonging to different spheres; it breaks down categories that isolate. It challenges and confuses margins and centre. Hospitality involves a way of thinking without the presumption of knowing beforehand what is in the mind of the other; dialogue with the other is essential . . . To welcome the other means the willingness to enter the world of the other . . .<sup>16</sup>

Of course this is the magic of mission and the challenge of the gospel; when we encounter the other as guest or host; insider or outsider (like Peter and Cornelius); when we engage in deep listening; then we too are transformed and changed. We learn new things about ourselves and about the gospel; the whole guest/host idea begins to break down and becomes much more fluid and blurry as we learn from and relate to one another in mutual exchange and reciprocity. A good example of this was when the first Church Mission Society missionaries arrived in Aotearoa, New Zealand 200 years ago. One Māori bishop recently reminded us that the first missionaries ‘were hopelessly outnumbered, and utterly dependent on the gracious hospitality that was being extended to them by Māori.’<sup>17</sup>

One final thought on this concerns food and the meal table; it is a great way of learning and relating. Eating together is a great leveller; it is something that we all must do so it has a profoundly egalitarian dimension. Jean Vanier,

15 Pohl, *Making Room*, 24.

16 Lucien Richard, *Living the Hospitality of God* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), 12.

17 Archbishop Brown Turie, <http://www.anglicantaonga.org.nz/Features/Extra/Reflection>.



of l'Arche community, writes about when he started to share meals with those with serious mental disabilities: 'Sitting down at the same table meant becoming friends with them, creating a family. It was a way of life absolutely opposed to the values of a competitive, hierarchical society in which the weak are pushed aside.'<sup>18</sup> When we eat together, as we let down our guard and share stories, we begin to create relationships and this is at the heart of mission – our relationship with God and neighbour. In a unique moment in the book of Ephesians we see Jews and Gentiles, insiders and outsiders, hosts and guests, coming together. The test of their coming together in the church, in the household of God, was the meal table; the institution that once symbolised ethnic and cultural division now became a symbol of Christian living. It is this experience that was reproduced at Antioch, Jerusalem, and other places as 'one of the most noticeable features of life in the Jesus community,' for 'the followers of Jesus took every opportunity to eat together.'<sup>19</sup> Imagine how we could celebrate with all the marvellous foods and traditional dishes from our various countries – what a fusion and feast of food and relationships could be had around the table.

### Single culture/multiethnic

These terms are slippery. What might look like a single culture congregation to an outsider may in fact have many different cultures within it. What is our vision for the Kingdom of God and human flourishing? I think we gain a glimpse of this in Rev. 7:9: "a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb."

The recent WCC Statement, *Together Towards Life*, affirms the following:

More than ever before, local congregations today can play a key role in emphasizing the crossing of cultural and racial boundaries and affirming cultural difference as a gift of the Spirit. Rather than being perceived as a problem, migration can be seen as offering new possibilities for churches to re-discover themselves afresh. It inspires opportunities for the creation of intercultural and multicultural churches at the local level. All churches can create space for different cultural communities to come together and embrace exciting opportunities for contextual expressions of intercultural mission in our time.<sup>20</sup>

18 Pohl, *Making Room*, 74.

19 Emanuel Katangole, "Mission and the Ephesian Moment of World Christianity: Pilgrimages of Pain and Hope and the Economics of Eating Together," *Mission Studies*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2012, 189.

20 *Together Towards Life*, 75.

<https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/mission-and-evangelism/together-towards-life-mission-and-evangelism-in-changing-landscapes>.

“Intercultural and multicultural churches” – this sounds like the vision in Revelation, but is that what we see around us? I think we see a variety of approaches and models when it comes to churches with diaspora Christians. We see single culture churches, churches with different cultures, or different cultural congregations meeting in the same building or venue at different times.

It may well be that a single or similar culture church is helpful and appropriate. It can offer support and understanding for those newly arrived who are struggling to settle into a new context. Emma Wild-Wood writes sympathetically and with great insight on this:

Single/similar culture congregations often act as a refuge from a hostile or bewildering environment, providing a place to be oneself, to learn news from home, or send remittances to family members. Gender and generational expectations, which may be inverted by new work patterns, can resume a familiar pattern in the church. Members can give and receive advice on the destination culture: for those migrating from the global south to the north this might include how to deal with an individualistic ethos when one is accustomed to family- or community-centred ethics, how to use technological advancements, or adapt to a market economy, or comprehend the competing claims of freedoms and rights.<sup>21</sup>

This may be a necessary stage and a place of healing and wholeness for those who are experiencing dislocation. These churches can offer a place of love and support while enabling adaptation to the new environment. This may all be legitimate if the aim is to offer welcome, a safe haven and pastoral care. This is especially important for first generation migrants but it becomes more complex for the second and especially third generations.

Multicultural congregations can also take a variety of forms. Some may have one or two cultures, such as Methodist churches in London which have white British members and members who originate from Ghana or Zimbabwe. These African members may organise themselves into fellowship groups along linguistic lines. Others may have a majority from one country with smaller numbers from a variety of other countries. The WCC statement affirms, “All churches can create space for different cultural communities to come together and embrace exciting opportunities for contextual expressions of intercultural mission in our time.”

Multiethnic congregations do have the potential to offer a prophetic role model to our society; but the place of culture and the variety of the migrant experience varies enormously. Some congregations may emphasise Gal 3:28 as a plea to ignore and overlook difference. However, this then can become a way to favour the majority, silence the ethnic minorities and perpetuate

21 Wild-Wood, *Mission*, 58.

power imbalances and injustice. And yet how can one be so inclusive as not to be chaotic? Assimilation may be practised and welcomed . . . or it may not. Assimilation can be both positive and negative. It may in fact be easier and more comfortable to celebrate the plurality of cultures rather than address tensions that can arise from difference and dislocation. This is where hospitality becomes important, but again cultural expectations around this may need careful negotiation and explanation.

### Conclusion

Going back to Rev 7, this is a wonderful vision of all the ethnic groups around the throne; all different cultures, languages, ways of speaking; different ethnic origins. And who exactly are these people in this passage? According to Rev 7:14, “they have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” This must have been such an encouraging vision for those early persecuted Christians – a vision to give them a future and a hope. These early Christians, who had been scattered, persecuted and had struggled, many of them of course from different parts of the Roman Empire, were given this glimpse of a future reality. And it was not only a future reality but also a partial reality even then. This song was sung out of suffering and tribulation; the references to ‘no more hunger’, ‘no more thirst’ and ‘no more tears’ bear testimony to that. The vision is one of glorious diversity and difference, a vision that does indeed acknowledge our differences and particularities, as well as acknowledging the suffering that may have been endured. We know that for many Christians in our world, suffering is part of their daily existence, whether through forced migration, poverty, systemic injustice or persecution. We also know that ultimately, our citizenship is in heaven, our identity is in Christ, and we can rejoice in the gifts that our particular ethnic identities can offer.

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