

The Missiological Challenge of our Changing Continent

by Michael Pocock, Dallas Theological Seminary (June, 2003)

For a number of years, the inescapable sense was coming over us. Joe Henriquez and I had both been missionaries to other lands; he to his parent's native Portugal, and I to Venezuela, fired by Elizabeth Elliot's accounts of her husband's death with other martyrs at the hands of the Ecuadorian Indians. Both our parents were immigrants. I came to America at age thirteen. Rather than staying in America, we responded to the spiritual needs outside of the United States. Over ten years ago, we began to see that our adopted nation had not simply welcomed us as Europeans from two different countries, but welcomed citizens from all over the world. The US and Canada were becoming not just a mosaic of largely European peoples, but a rapidly changing kaleidoscope of world cultures. How could we not see that this continent had become a missionary and missiological challenge?

The urban areas of this continent have always been the major magnets of immigration, but rural areas too have exerted their attraction. In the nineteenth century, transcontinental railways advertised the prairie lands lining the grants the companies had received as payment for their investment. The companies drew the Irish to build the eastern section of the railroad, and the Chinese to build the West. Just as those immigrants helped to build America, newer immigrants continue in almost every field, rural and urban. Joe could see it clearly in the area of Washington, DC, and Northern Virginia, and for med People of the World, a mission to newly arriving internationals. Stephan Rhodes has documented the incredible complexity and opportunity of that area, and has put together a multicultural church: the Culmore United Methodist Church in Fairfax, VA#. I could see it in Dallas, Texas, but both of us knew that without some outside catalytic action, the majority cultural churches would not reach out to newly arriving peoples. It was not always a lack of will, but of understanding and sometimes perception. This continent needed an internal missionary awakening!

Both Joe and I felt indebted to the country that became our home, but somewhat convicted that we had devoted most of our energies to reaching non-believers overseas. Joe's response was to form People of the World. I put together a course on Ministry in Multicultural America to get new ministers and Christian workers at the formative stage of their preparation, and equip them with intercultural perspectives and some models for ministry in our kaleidoscopic continent. A continent that seems always to be changing, yet ever fascinating in its ability to receive and assimilate diverse peoples.

The changing composition of North America is not news. It has always been diverse, but beginning in 1965 with a new Immigration Act the United States completely dropped its national origins policy that limited immigration from areas other than Europe. Now Asians, Middle eastern peoples, Latin Americans and Africans came in greater numbers, so that by the end of the 20th century, Caucasians represented only 75% of US population. Hispanics had replaced African Americans as the largest minority. Asians, though still only about 4% of the population, were the most rapidly growing sector.

Mission groups that have hitherto focused outside the continent have sensed the opportunity and need to pay attention to cultural diversity at home. Among the largest and most proactive are the North American Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. But other smaller non-denominational missions are rising to the challenge of using intercultural know-how gained overseas to the situation in North America. CAM International with an earlier focus on Central America now ministers to Spanish speakers in the North and elsewhere. SIM, after a century of

success in Sub-Sahara Africa, now deploys workers in ethnic American communities, particularly where there are concentrations of the peoples to whom they formerly ministered to overseas.

The Billy Graham Center now hosts the Ethnic America Network, and sponsors Ethnic Worker Summits each year across the continent. This year's summit will be in Minneapolis May 1-3. Others will follow in Philadelphia in 2004, and Dallas in 2005 (www.ethnic-america.net). These are indications of awakening to opportunities for outreach and opportunities for ethnic believers to minister to the challenges of their own communities.

As each wave of immigrants has come to this continent, churches have been formed by them or through ministry to them. These churches themselves are changing. Swedish immigrants formed the Salem Evangelical Free Church in Chicago, where the Swedish language was still in use for worship in the 1960s. Today that church is Hispanic. New Life Community grew out of the ethnically diverse "Back of the Yards" area in South Chicago. It still reflects the multicultural nature it had in the sixties, but now enfolds young Anglos, African American and Hispanics of the second and third generation. With highly effective outreach and discipleship. It is worth noting that Pastor Mark Jobe is an MK who grew up in Spain. He brings the dynamism of his father and the outlook of a missionary to urban America.

Whether it is Faith Lutheran Church in Surrey BC composed of Chinese, Koreans, Anglos, and Latinos; First Chinese Baptist Church of Seattle; Asian American Baptist Church of Richardson, Texas; or First Presbyterian of Jamaica, Queens, NY, this continent is beginning to abound with vibrant churches that reflect our more diverse society. But still I am concerned that many majority culture churches and even mission societies with a call to each the lost world wide are failing to respond to the challenge of this kaleidoscopic scene. What should they do?

1. Churches should get their leadership together and learn what is happening and the steps they can take to minister to a diverse community. Read some of the books listed below.
2. Seminaries and Bible colleges should design courses to prepare students for the way this continent will actually be during the graduate's ministries. These should build intercultural understanding, show models of intercultural ministry, and prepare ministers to lead churches through change. No church will enfold those of other cultures without some fundamental changes in the way they do church.
3. Denominations should appoint resource people who can be catalysts for change, showing local church leadership that without intentional guidance and new vision, no existing church will just "stumble" into effective intercultural outreach.

The reason North America continues to attract the peoples of the world is because something has been created here that constitutes a beacon of hope in a chaotic world. Much of the basis for this hope grows out of commitment and application of Judeo-Christian principles based on the Word of God, even in the face of much societal weakness and inconsistency. It is crucial that scripture principles including the transforming power of Jesus Christ be communicated to the new North America. Missiology figures in this task. It integrates insights from the social sciences with those of scripture. Those who would reach the more diverse North America of this millennium need to study the history of peoples coming here, the demographics of where they live and work, world religions they represent, and insights gained from studies in intercultural communication. Missionaries and missiologists should point the way to winning our own continent for Christ.

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Read On

John Fuder, ed. *A Heart for the City*. Chicago: Moody Press, 2001 (Contains multiple case studies of effective urban and ethnic ministries in Chicago).

Manuel Ortiz. *One new People: Models for developing a Multiethnic Church*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996.

Michael Pocock and Joe Henriques. *Cultural Change in Your Church: Helping Your Church Thrive in A Diverse Society*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002.

Endnotes

¹ Rhodes, Stephan. *Where Nations Meet; The Church in a Multicultural World*. Downer's Grove, IL 1998

² Cose, Ellis. *A Nation of Strangers: Prejudice, Politics, and the Population of America*. New York: William Morrow, 1992 (pp.106-111 cited in Pocock/Henriques)

³ Table DP-1, "Profile of General Demographic Characteristics:2000," *The 2000 Census of Population and Housing-United States, May 2001*. (p.76 cited in Pocock/Henriques)

⁴ For cases Studies of New Life Community Church see Mark Jobe, "Rethinking John Fuder", *Heart for the City*. Chicago: Moody Press, 2001 (pp 203-214 and Pocock/Henriques, 20-22, 179-192).