
THE CHURCH IN MISSION

Foundations and Global Case Studies

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Foreword by William D. Taylor



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ETHIOPIAN DIASPORA MISSION

Wondimu Mathewos Game

The God of mission is also the God of history. “History is his story.” Throughout history and the generations, God has been—and is—in control to accomplish his divine will through his church as well as through global trends.

This is the era of globalization. Globalization is not a threat to God and his church. On the other hand, globalization, socioeconomic factors, religious persecution, and political instability have caused extensive migration and increased the mobility of people. “Very few people today live in the geographical area where their ancestors originated. Most of us have come from somewhere else even if it was centuries ago.”¹

The effect of migration is multidimensional and wide-ranging; it inevitably creates changes in diaspora communities themselves, for their country of origin and for host countries. However, such dispersion gives ample opportunities to complete the Great Commission. As a missional church of this era, Ethiopian churches are viewing diaspora people as missionaries in the mission field. “Nonetheless, it is unfortunately true that migration has been traditionally viewed as a political and social challenge. It is only in recent years that diaspora has been taken seriously as a unique missionary gift.”²

History of Migration and the Role of Diaspora in Cross-Cultural Mission

Since the fall of Adam, migration has been a fact of human history. “For as long as human beings have inhabited the planet, relocation, displacement, and population transfers have marked the human condition.”³ Following the division of language and dispersal of humankind, God called Abraham to go to a new country: “Go to the land that I will show you” (Gen 11:1–9). God initiated Abraham’s migration and promised to give him the land, to bless him with upper level and lower level blessings, and to bless the whole family of

1 Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, *The New People Next Door* (2004) www.lausanne.org/docs/2004forum/LOP55_IG26.pdf.

2 S. Hun Kim, *Korean Diaspora and Christian Mission* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 1.

3 J. Jehu Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 356.

the earth through him.⁴ Abraham was a migrant, moving through different nations and even continents until the end of his life. Abraham's descendants—Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and all of Israel—were migrants and were scattered all over the world for a variety of different spiritual, economic, political, and social reasons. “The Old Testament patriarchs (and matriarchs) were frequently migrants. Abraham, the prototypical migrant, models the profound integration of mobility, spiritual pilgrimage, and the unfolding of divine purpose.”⁵

Moreover, Daniel and his three friends glorified God while in exile. Ruth was a migrant and became an ancestor of Jesus. Naaman's Israelite servant girl witnessed to the power of the true God in a foreign land to her host family. The book of Esther also speaks of God's favor in exile. God in his mercy used the exilic situation for his glory and to bless the host land, “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf” (Jer 29:4–7).⁶

In the New Testament, we see how God incarnated in Jesus Christ intervened in human history, through his earthly ministry, death, and resurrection.⁷ Jesus sent his disciples “unto the ends of the world” (Acts 1:8).⁸

Moreover, on the historic day of Pentecost, the church was born precisely at the time when people of the Diaspora (Jews and proselytes) were gathering from all over the world. As a consequence, those Diaspora members who converted on the day of Pentecost went back to their villages with the good news. They were the first missionaries; also the first cross-cultural church was planted through scattered disciples and Diaspora members in Samaria.⁹

Furthermore, in early church history most of the apostles were martyred in the mission field, not in Jerusalem. Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome, Thomas was martyred in India, and Matthew was martyred in Ethiopia.¹⁰ The worldview and lifestyle of these early Christian pilgrims has been described as follows: “For them any foreign country is a motherland, and any motherland is a foreign country.”¹¹ Thus, Christianity reached much of the world before the medieval era.

Likewise, even though the approaches used and the motives behind it were questionable, migration associated with colonialism led to church growth. “The missionary impulse intimately intertwined with the extraordinary swell of Europe migrant movement and imperial actions were equally unprecedented missionary initiatives ... They were also convinced that imperial acquisitions were providentially ordained for the expansion of the gospel of salvation.”¹²

4 Genesis 12:1–3, 10–16; 26:1–3; 28:10–15; Hebrews 11:8–11.

5 Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, 143.

6 Daniel 2,3,4,5:25–28; Ruth 1:11–18; Matthew 1:5–6; 1 Kings 1–7; 2 Kings 5: 1–18; Esther 7,8,9.

7 John 1:14; Philippians 2:7; John 3:16

8 Matthew 28:16–20; Mark 16:8–20; John 20:21; Acts 1:6–8.

9 Acts 2:1–13; Acts 8:1–4; 11:19, 13:1–3.

10 Patrick Johnstone, *The Future of the Global Church: History, Trends and Possibilities* (UK: Biblica, 2011), 23.

11 Andrew Louth, ed., “Letter to Diognetus,” in *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 145

12 Andrew Walls and Cathy Ross, eds., *Mission in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Orbis, 2008), 120.

The era of globalization is “the age of migration.” Migration is at an all-time high. In 2001 it was estimated that “one in thirty-five (191 million) of the world’s population are registered as migrants.”¹³ Whatever the cause of migration, migrants travel with their religion.

The massive migrations throughout the continent in recent decades have also stimulated an extraordinary and unprecedented expansion of the African missionary movement.¹⁴

In simple terms, from both a biblical and a historical perspective, every Christian migrant is a potential missionary. Precisely because the heartlands of global Christianity are now in the south, contemporary South-North migration forms the taproot of major non-Western missionary movement.¹⁵

Furthermore, migrant churches are some of the fastest growing churches in Europe and America. “African churches in London are growing much more rapidly than any other.”¹⁶

Ethiopian Diaspora Mission

Ethiopia is one of the countries in this global trend whose people migrate at a very high rate. “It has been a long time since Ethiopians started to leave their homeland and migrate to various countries due to political, economic, and social reasons.”¹⁷ And according to different sources “It is estimated that not less than two million Ethiopian diaspora are residing in North America, Europe, the Middle East, Australia, and Africa.”¹⁸

Moreover, the local and international media has recently reported that the Saudi Arabian government expelled more than 165,000 illegal Ethiopian immigrants. This clearly indicates that an uncountable number of legal and illegal Ethiopians are living and working in the Middle East. Many Middle Eastern countries, agencies, and agents, as well as Ethiopian agencies, are recruiting Ethiopian professionals for high professional positions, as labor workers, and as house maids. Most of these migrants are Christians with a burning passion to share Christ with others.

However, the level of orientation or training for these migrants to share Christ with their words and deeds is very low. Because of the lack of proper orientation, most Ethiopian migrants are below their capacity concerning missionary responsibility. Most are more concerned with keeping their Christianity for themselves. They can easily gather within an Ethiopian Fellowship and worship in their own local language. They are often more inclined to serve their home country than their host country. Thus, most Ethiopians living abroad are living in their “ghetto,” in the attitude of a refugee.

13 Patrick Johnstone, *The Future of the Global Church: History, Trends and Possibilities* (Colorado Springs, CO: Biblica, 2011), 4.

14 Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, 218.

15 Ibid, 278.

16 Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, *The New People Next Door*, 19.

17 www.ethdiaspora.org.et.

18 www.ethdiaspora.org.et.

On the other hand, it is said that twenty-first century mission is from everywhere to everywhere. Our missionary God is raising an uncountable army from countries that were formerly themselves considered to be the mission field. “Mission fields have become mission forces and a new epoch of Christian mission has been inaugurated ... Evangelical mission today goes from everywhere to everywhere and the traditional concepts of sending and receiving countries are outdated.”¹⁹

As a result of the gravity of twenty-first century mission, most Ethiopian churches have made a policy decision to be missional churches and have officially announced their intention to become a mission force for world evangelization. Most denominations are sending missionaries: for example the Ethiopian Kale Heywet Church and the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, the two largest Ethiopian denominations, have started to send missionaries. Other denominations are also preparing themselves to start missional movements.

In this era, Ethiopian Christian migrants are already in the mission field. There are lots of Ethiopian churches in Europe and North America as well as in the Middle East. Most of them are well organized and are reaching many non-Christian Ethiopians and Eritreans. They have bought church buildings in different countries from mainline churches. For example, in the center of London at Kings Cross, the Ethiopian Fellowship Church in the UK bought a building from the Anglican Church and is worshipping there.

However, Ethiopian diaspora churches are often more inward looking and do not contribute significantly to world evangelization. Their main challenge relates to the attitude of leaders and ministers towards cross-cultural mission. For most Ethiopians, including church leaders and ministers, “mission is the responsibility of white people.” Ethiopia has been a missionary-receiving country for decades. This has shaped the attitudes of Ethiopians to mission.

However, there are also practical barriers hindering Ethiopians’ engagement in cross-cultural mission.

Language challenges: English is the second or third language of most Ethiopians. This is especially a problem when Ethiopian preachers attempt to preach in English: “this linguistic distinction is much more difficult to overcome in public preaching, which, for most African pastors, tends to be an impassioned affair.”²⁰

Refugee attitude/living in a ghetto: Ethiopian diaspora members are more attached to their home country than their host country. Their dream is to be a blessing to their own land. “For the diaspora church, inward-looking behavior creates barriers to reaching out to other ethnic diasporas, the host culture, and the marginalized.” However, the second and third generations are better at relating to their host community and culture.

Western secularism and consumerism culture influence: For people from a Third World background, relating to the postmodern secularist worldview is one of the greatest challenges.

19 L. Bertil Ekström, *From “Mission Field” to “Mission Force”: The Emergence of Mission Organisations in Former Mission Receiving Countries* (Ware, UK: All Nations Christian College, 2011), 325.

20 Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, 367.

To Ethiopian believers, the self-centered and self-worshipping tendencies of the postmodern secularist person are challenging and shocking.

To overcome these challenges and to use the Ethiopian diaspora effectively for God's mission it would be wise to focus on the following:

- Awareness-raising and attitude-changing strategies can help the Ethiopian diaspora "to live in the world for the world, but not of the world."²¹ These can include capacity-building programs (including consultation and training of trainers) about diaspora in cross-cultural mission.
- Networking and engagement strategies can enhance the Ethiopian diaspora churches' impact and make them into a powerful mission force.

Conclusion

"Crucially, the interface between human mobility and divine purposes in the biblical history is unmistakable and compelling. The inextricable link between migrant movements and the *missio Dei* (the mission of God) arguably confirms the historicity of many events."²² Whether they realize it or not, evangelical Ethiopian migrants are potential missionaries with the purpose of reaching both unreached natives and other migrants with the gospel.

In conclusion, understanding the following issues and teaching them to Ethiopian evangelical immigrants is crucial for engaging them in cross-cultural mission and maximizing opportunities:

- God is a missionary God: mission flows from him.
- The nature of the church and mission of the church: The church is missionary by her very nature. Mission is her identity and life purpose. The church exists because of and for mission. (Romans 1:14–16)
- The power of the gospel: The gospel is the power of God to transform and to redeem generations and nations.
- The life purpose of Christian disciples: God's divine agenda is more important than their wellbeing.
- Migration and the role of diaspora in the fulfillment of God's historic purposes: "The Bible's history and message would be meaningless without migration and mobility."²³

21 Girma Bekele, *The In-Between People: A Reading of David Bosch Through the Lens of Mission History and Contemporary Challenges in Ethiopia* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 324.

22 Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, 141.

23 Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*, 140.

Questions for Reflection:

1. In what ways can diaspora be seen as a unique missionary gift? What are some of the examples in history mentioned by the author that proves that affirmation? Are there other examples from your own context?
2. Wondimu Mathewos mentions several challenges that the Ethiopian diaspora face when engaging in cross-cultural mission. What are some of the other challenges that you have seen or experienced in missionary work through migration?

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