

# Waves of Blessing, Waves of Change

BY RANDY WHITE

**Surf's up, brothers and sisters! We can ride this wave of immigration to North America by acknowledging that God is in the current, adopting mutually dependent ministry postures alongside immigrants, and recognizing their contribution to the vitality of the church and the transformation of secular society.**

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**A**s you gaze over the ocean from the bluff above San Simeon beach on the Central California coast, the waves have a mesmerizing quality. They do not come single file but crisscross, overlapping each other at angles, sometimes combining to build force, sometimes canceling each other out. Not the best for surfing, though surfers try. They will catch a gentle wave, only to have their run altered by an undetected bank of foam, ambushing them from an odd approach. Beginning surfers go under. Old-timers change their strategy.

## **AN OCEAN OF CHANGE**

Surfing as a metaphor for what it means to be the church in the midst of migrant streams? For a world in motion, it makes perfect sense. Some immigrant waves are predictable and powerful. Others go undetected, exercising an unanticipated influence. As the realities of migration, both legal and non-legal, continue to change the dynamic of American cities, the once mono-ethnic, mono-class churches that wish to respond must learn whole new skill sets.

The world is in motion. Today, almost 200 million people live in a country they were not born in. About thirteen and a half million of those are refugees; the rest voluntarily left their homeland to seek a better life.<sup>1</sup> Many mono-ethnic, middle-class congregations ironically moved from the city to escape its prob-

lems, but these once-suburban churches now are being embraced by poor immigrant congregants who have been driven from gentrifying urban contexts. The rules of outreach and disciple making are changing, and church leaders are realizing that navigating their particular ocean is getting more complex.

In my own state of California, more than half of its residents were not born there, the gap between rich and poor has never been wider, and the diversity never greater. Fresno, where I live, now has the sad designation of having the highest rate of concentrated poverty of any city in the nation. Couple that with a growth rate due to migration higher than anywhere in the United States and it is enough to ensure that any strategy of the church devised without regard for these changes is doomed to be ambushed by the undetected wave.<sup>2</sup> Today, more Mexicans live in Los Angeles than in any city of Mexico, with the exception of Mexico City and Guadalajara. More Cambodians live in Long Beach than in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. More Filipinos live in Daly City than anywhere outside of Manila. Fresno is the Hmong capital of the world outside of Laos, and Central California is the center of Sikh life in the United States. Today, twenty-two percent of U.S. children younger than six have immigrant parents.<sup>3</sup> Churches that are unprepared for the leadership challenges presented by rapid population growth, or unwilling to become involved in the social needs of new arrivals, or unaware of how to help their middle-class congregants leverage their privileges for the well-being of these new arms and legs in the body of Christ will become irrelevant, mere socio-economic enclaves, and ignored by a new humanity set in motion. These are forces more vast and all-encompassing than anyone has anticipated.

## **STUDYING THE OCEAN**

At the very least, these realities require pastors and lay leaders of churches in urban areas to ask at least four key questions. The first question is theological. Given the realities of massive worldwide human migration, both legal and non-legal, due to the “push” factors of displacement and the “pull” factors of a hope for a better life, what do we think God is doing through these large-scale movements of people across national borders, and why? A second question is pragmatic. What are some of the most important and practical ways that Christian churches can participate effectively in this process, cooperating with God’s Kingdom-building work? A third question is evaluative. How will churches that are primarily mono-ethnic and mono-class but wishing to connect with immigrant communities need to design or alter their outreach strategies? And a fourth question is prophetic. What contributions do Christian immigrants make both to the theological vitality and insight of the North American church and to the transformation of secular society?

## **SURF’S UP!**

What is God doing? Appropriately, this first question for churches is theological in its essence. Kit Danley, founder and director of Neighborhood Ministries in Phoenix, Arizona, which has for more than a quarter-century served the

immigrant community from an eight-acre campus in the center of town, believes that the church is at a *kairos* moment, a divinely appointed time, with regard to immigration. She echoes the contention of Timothy L. Smith that we are at a historic "'theologizing moment,' an occasion when many social needs of new immigrants will test and are testing the theology of churches."<sup>4</sup> Though we do not have the space here to develop this fully (I recommend Danley's full

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study), we must ask the most basic question: "Is God's hand actively involved in the great migrations of people we see taking place today?" As millions of people cross national boundaries, through legal and non-legal means, heading for the great urban centers, what might God in his sovereignty be accomplishing? This question contains an assumption that he

is either allowing or causing migration. But rather than being sidetracked by that "how-many-angels-can-dance-on-the-head-of-a-pin" discussion, and human factors (war, famine, oppression, economic opportunity, etc.) aside, we should ask, "Now that the situation is as it is, what might God do with it?"

Cities are blessings to the poor. As historian and theologian Ray Bakke observes, Scripture equates the city with the goodness of God and his steadfast love toward his people as they wandered in the desert.<sup>5</sup> As God's people, refugees from Babylon, "cried to the LORD in their trouble," the city was his answer to their prayer (Psalm 107:1-7). As the apostle Paul addressed that distinguished gathering on the Areopagus in Athens, the urban heart of the Greek world, he reminded them that it is God who has "made all nations [all ethnic groups] to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live" (Acts 17:26). Because we believe in a sovereign God who by his will causes or allows the movements of people across the earth, we can have confidence that the hand of God is active in this process. That same text provides further insight into what he might be accomplishing through urbanization and the internationalization of cities. It says "he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, *so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him*" (17:26b-27a, italics added). There is something about the dynamic of whole people groups in motion that creates a spiritual longing and a thirst for God. People intuitively gravitate toward the city in their vulnerability. And in God's design, this has something to do with their search for him. We need to equip ourselves as disciples to begin at this bedrock foundation.

But the theologizing does not end there. God promised Abraham to bless him in order to make him a blessing. Pastor Jonathan Villalobos of Bethany Inter-City Church in Fresno, California, has ministered among the urban poor for two decades. His offerings on Sundays are often collected in coins, not bills. He is uniquely connected to the lives of immigrants in his congregation and to the Latino leadership community in his city. Pastor Villalobos, himself an immigrant, observes that there have always been movements of people, and that God uses these movements to *save lives*, as in the story of Joseph in Genesis, and the children of Israel in Psalm 107. But he contends that God uses these same lives to bless the world through various disciplines – for instance, labor, science, entertainment, sports, and social change – citing examples such as Guillermo Gonzalez Camarena (1917-1965), a Mexican national from Guadalajara Jalisco who invented the color TV, or actress Selma Hayek, or golfer Nancy Lopez, or civil rights champion Cesar Chavez, or the one who picks grapes in the field. It is a movable feast of talent.

Reverend Mitt Moua of Trinity Christian Church in Sanger, California, leads a denomination and congregation of primarily Hmong and Lao people, former refugees and the children of refugees. He has helped many of these integrate into American culture. He believes that they are operationalizing the words of Jesus when he said “come unto me all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). He believes that God’s hand is active in bringing good from the transitions caused by both political and economic migration, by bringing belief systems into close contact in a manner that is illuminating. For many coming from animist cultures this provides concrete and liberating examples of another way to view their own lives. They see benefit in the lives of Christians and find new freedom.

The Reverend Sharon Stanley of Fresno’s Interdenominational Refugee Ministry (FIRM) would agree, but would contend that good goes the other way as well. God loves the culture-centric, segregated, consumerist, comfortable Western church too much to leave it that way and brings, in Justo González’s words, “voices from below” to vitalize and renew it. This is Philip Jenkins’s “faith on the move,” the fast-growing churches in the Southern Hemisphere influencing both the face and the practice of Christianity in once vital but now declining Christian centers. I’ll talk more about this later when we discuss our fourth question.<sup>6</sup>

These practitioners operate from a common theological assumption, that God’s hand is active in the immigration process, and that his primary concern is not whether immigrants are legal or non-legal, but that they are *being changed* and are *bringing change* for the praise of his glory and advance of his Kingdom.

## **RIDING THE WAVE**

How can churches participate in this work of God? The pragmatism reflected in this second question has been the primary response of rank-and-file Christians and leadership when presented with the obvious social needs

of the immigrant community. Though nearly one in five express grave reservations about whether or not the scriptural mandate to “welcome the stranger” applies to the immigration debate, according to a survey by *Christianity Today*, when faced with obvious needs individual church members have formulated programs and forms of outreach to contribute something toward alleviating that need.<sup>7</sup> A national study of Mennonite churches

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found general willingness on the part of congregants to be involved with immigrants, though many felt confused about how to help. But they also discovered that the normal political divisions of the denomination influenced discussion of outreach to immigrants *more* than did

biblical perspectives.<sup>8</sup> Thus, perhaps the first answer to the question of how churches can participate in this work of God involves immersing congregations in some of the biblical perspectives addressed above in question one.

Pastor Villalobos feels that participation in outreach to immigrants must not be left to the individual sentiments and good intentions of congregants, but must be built structurally into the stated goals of existing churches that live in the context of migrant streams. He cites examples of churches that include this focus in their infrastructure and budgets in the form of advocacy, legal advice, practical help, and so on. Reverend Mitt Moua would agree, but he warns that church-based programs must be staffed by people who reflect God's heart. People in transition, people who are vulnerable, are especially sensitive to the attitude of those who help. In addition, the church scattered can make a profound difference in their professions as they encounter members of the immigrant community. Christians working at the Welfare Department, at the Police Department, in the legal profession, or in small businesses they own can play key roles in being the hands and feet of Jesus, providing hospitality, leveraging their privileges for the sake of the last, the least, and the lost. Overall, Reverend Moua contends that there must be a balance of short-term approaches, which focus on meeting immediate needs (providing ESL classes, various training courses, child care, and so on) and long-term approaches, which might involve adopting families and providing economic development, working connections, and networking for the benefit of the immigrant community.

This kind of thoughtful, intentional posture merely reflects the historic posture of churches and synagogues toward foreigners who come to worship. Citing Joachim Jeremias's *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, Jose Ortiz reminds us how foreigners who were in Jerusalem to conduct commercial

enterprises also demonstrated interest in the religious life of the city. While some were there temporarily to make money and go home, others stayed and settled, similar to immigrant patterns today. "Many were hosted by families or had other connections. Some synagogues had extra rooms and water available to offer hospitality to people coming from faraway places."<sup>9</sup>

The extent to which congregations today in cities being affected by immigration are asking questions about hospitality and care for migrants signals a readiness to adopt a more intentional posture of outreach. Unfortunately, most churches in these contexts are not asking even this most basic question.

Perhaps the most foundational thing a congregation can do to participate in this work of God is to address directly members' misinformation and erroneous assumptions which are based on politicized and polarized sentiments within the wider culture. One denominational survey found that church members depend almost solely on television in forming their opinions about immigration.<sup>10</sup> These assumptions may include the beliefs that undocumented immigrants steal American jobs (they do not, according to the 2006 Pew Hispanic Center study), that they cost American taxpayers a fortune in social services (economist Francine J. Lippman demonstrates they contribute more than they cost), or that most immigrants crossed the border illegally (they did not: seventy-five percent have legal, permanent visas).<sup>11</sup>

Lay leaders or clergy must be willing to invest some time in researching and communicating responses to these common concerns in a manner that can be heard and acted upon. This is no small request in light of what is already on the full plate of the average pastor, and in light of the politically charged nature of the discussion, which runs the possibility of dividing a congregation. But these disincentives begin to dissolve as the personal relationships among pastors, lay leaders, and immigrant families deepen. Through these firsthand relationships the rhetoric subsides and the power of human dignity takes over. Against the backdrop of these relationships the voice of the immigrant can finally be heard. In the words of Cesar Chavez,

What do we want the Church to do?... We ask for its presence with us, beside us, as Christ among us. We ask the Church to sacrifice with the people for social change, for justice, and for love of brother. We don't ask for words. We ask for deeds. We don't ask for paternalism. We ask for servanthood.<sup>12</sup>

## **NEW SURFBOARDS?**

How will primarily mono-ethnic, mono-class churches that wish to connect with immigrant communities need to redesign or alter their outreach strategies? It is more than providing a few ESL classes or a food pantry. According to Reverend Stanley at FIRM it may involve a fundamental re-imagining of relationships as well as methodologies. Project directors at FIRM learned this lesson as leaders in the immigrant community helped them

reshape the programs FIRM designed to reach out to immigrant needs in the areas of housing, literacy, advocacy, job training and placement, and so on. "Churches and nonprofits seeking to connect with and serve immigrant communities must allow ourselves to be led by others, must allow immigrants to determine the forms and the strategies best suited to both meet their needs and encourage their potential," says Reverend Stanley. This level of parity will lead to appropriate forms of outreach, including contextualized worship, interdependent financial relationships, and shared leadership retreats.

This immigrant/non-immigrant partnership eventually will impact the methodologies we use, including the church rituals at our disposal. For instance, with many of the Southeast Asian refugee population the most effective forms of outreach have included Christ-centered religious protection rituals such as house cleansings or spirit cleansings. Many immigrants live in dilapidated housing where massive infestations of roaches or mold and mildew act as the physical symbols of the oppression of the poor by absentee landlords who do not repair or invest in the safety of their facilities, exploiting the fear many immigrants have over reporting problems. In addition, non-literate methodologies become important. In Stanley's words, "the bulletin won't do it." The use of drama, singing, and dancing become central, and here again the quality of immigrant/non-immigrant ministry partnerships is the most crucial factor. Is there enough trust to allow immigrant lay leaders to reshape the form of the congregation's outreach?

Trusting immigrant leadership is key. Pastor Villalobos notes that more than 20% of Fresno's five hundred churches are Latino, and of these he estimates 60% are led by undocumented pastors. These pastors are the best equipped to understand the needs of immigrant communities, both legal and non-legal, but have few resources with which to work. More often than not they are bivocational, working another job during the week while simultaneously pastoring their congregations. They provide an unbelievable level of service to members and newcomers, often finding jobs for new migrants, sometimes on their own work sites. They provide informal translation, transportation, and referrals to doctors, dentists, and schools. Some provide short-term housing. They are stretched to the limit in what they believe is their calling: many have little formal theological education and work in isolation from other immigrant pastors due to the limitations of their work schedules, the heavy demands of ministry life, and the lack of time and resources. Middle-class, non-immigrant congregations could greatly assist in the development of leadership in this community if they would accompany immigrant pastors through the process of becoming legal residents, provide education for them in formal and informal mentoring, and sponsor aspects of their professional training. In reality, these pastors provide valuable care for many legal immigrants, members of the body of Christ who are not the focus of the middle-class church's evangelism or discipleship efforts, as well as those who are undocumented. Pastor Villalobos feels that the key

issue is not the immigrants' status, but rather their presence. Christian hospitality requires that "the alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 19:33-34, NIV).<sup>13</sup>

### **IMMIGRANT CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ART OF SURFING**

What contributions do Christian immigrants make to both the theological vitality and insight of the North American church and to the transformation of secular society? Jennifer Doerrie, an immigration attorney for the Mennonite Central Committee in Reedley, California, believes that Christian immigrants, both legal and non-legal, "import practices and traditions from home that freshen and invigorate practices here, but also engender debate and cross-cultural conflict" that is good for the church. A corollary to this contribution, observes Reverend Mitt Moua, is that "recent immigrants experience the love of God and live out their faith without material wealth, relying on spiritual resources, which is a lesson an affluent, Western church needs." Pastor Villalobos points out that recent immigrants from the Catholic tradition bring a high view of God and a reverence that is often absent in many Protestant denominations, providing important balance to a very casual American Christianity. In addition, he feels they bring a more expressive theology and worship, heating up more cold and formal versions of faith and practice in mainline churches.

Those who choose to build real relationships with recent immigrants notice a depth and substance that the immigrant experience has created in the lives of individuals and families that become living metaphors for what God wants to do in the North American church. Many immigrants have had to cultivate faith in the context of a long multistage process of getting to their new home. Along the way there has been pain and sacrifice, some of it forced upon

them, some of it chosen.

"The memories and pain of the refugee speak to them as they apply Scripture. This visible awareness of faith forged in loss and pain, where a very real experience of Jesus Christ who has met their needs, can

speaking volumes to the North American church," observes Reverend Stanley. "This first person perspective gives us in the West a 'noisier' experience of Scripture." Imagining the journey of Jesus and his parents to Egypt by watching a Christmas pageant is one thing, but listening as an immigrant who has undergone the upheaval of relocation reflects on the refugee status and experience of the Holy Family offers a whole new level of insight.

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Beyond contributions in the church, immigrants contribute to the transformation of secular society. Pastor Villalobos notices the disintegration of the family in the United States and feels that Latino immigrants provide a counterbalance because of the high value that is placed on family unity. Immigrants from cultures that are animist, or even immigrants from Pentecostal Christian traditions that have categories for the presence of spirits, demons, and angels, force the secular culture and nominal Christians to consider the life of the spirit and the presence and relevance of an invisible, nonmaterial world. According to Stanley both Christian and non-Christian immigrants “heat up the religious atmosphere of our culture,” which becomes a catalyst for the church to discuss the relevance of the gospel. And in a culture in which mainstream Protestants will soon comprise less than half the population, we need all the help we can get.<sup>14</sup>

### **PADDLING IN**

The complexities of overlapping waves of immigration, the need for new surfing skills for church leaders, and the cultural assumptions and political posturing that act like deadly rocks to those who would navigate these waters, have proven too much for many congregations. They have chosen instead to ignore the vast, seismic shifts taking place across the globe.

The U.S. Census Bureau forecasts that by 2050 in America “the Hispanic population will have increased by 200 percent, the population as a whole by 50 percent, and whites, only 30 percent.”<sup>15</sup> These trends will influence the experience of the North American church, period. While the controversy over illegal immigration blazes, some cities actually court immigrants because they are seen as “an elixir for faltering economies. Among some immigrant groups the rate of entrepreneurship is two to three times that of the U.S. population.”<sup>16</sup> It is simultaneously hypocritical, unchristian, and myopic in terms of Christian outreach to depend on immigrant communities in this way while ignoring the need, the opportunity, and the amazing contribution immigrant communities can make to the Kingdom of God in North America. To consciously choose (or even passively allow by inaction) a non-relationship with immigrants in our communities because our culture or our class makes it difficult, inconvenient, or complex is to ignore the Lord himself who said, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25:35).

Surf’s up, brothers and sisters! The water is crazy and the shoreline is shifting under our feet. We can ride this wave by acknowledging that God is in the current, by helping the North American church choose to get into the water, by adopting mutually dependent ministry postures alongside immigrants, and by recognizing the contribution that newcomers make to the vitality of the church and the transformation of secular society. It is time to grab our boards and learn something new.

## NOTES

1 Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, *International Migration 2006* (United Nations Publication ST/ESA/SER.A/256), available online at [www.unpopulation.org](http://www.unpopulation.org). An unknown number of undocumented migrants may or may not be counted in official data.

2 Mark Baldassare and Ellen Hanak discuss the wealth distribution in *California 2025: It's Your Choice* (San Francisco, CA: Public Policy Institute of California, 2005), 25; available from [www.ppic.org](http://www.ppic.org). On poverty in Fresno, see Alan Berube, *Confronting Concentrated Poverty in Fresno* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, September 6, 2006); available from [www.brookings.edu](http://www.brookings.edu). On migration in this area of California, see Hans P. Johnson and Joseph M. Hayes, *The Central Valley at a Crossroads: Migration and Its Implications* (San Francisco, CA: Public Policy Institute of California, 2004), 1, 7, 10, and 48; available from [www.ppic.org](http://www.ppic.org).

3 David Crary, "Immigrants Want Good Life for Kids Born U.S. Citizens," *The Seattle Times* (June 5, 2005), citing the Urban Institute's 2005 Report on Immigration; available online at [seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/nationworld/2002307228\\_kids05.html](http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/nationworld/2002307228_kids05.html).

4 Kit Danley, *Blessing Not a Burden: A Theological Approach to the Immigration Issue* (Phoenix, AZ: Neighborhood Ministries, 2008), 2; available online at [www.gum.org/download/Evangelical-TheologicalApproachtoImmigrationbyKitDanley-2007.pdf](http://www.gum.org/download/Evangelical-TheologicalApproachtoImmigrationbyKitDanley-2007.pdf). The Web site for Neighborhood Ministries, [www.nmaz.net](http://www.nmaz.net), offers many resources for serving immigrant communities.

5 Raymond Bakke, informal comments in Beijing, China, April 2006.

6 See Justo L. González, *The Changing Shape of Church History* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2002), and Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

7 The Pulse, "I Was a Stranger," *Christianity Today* (September 2007), 96; available online at [www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/september/31.96.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/september/31.96.html).

8 MCC US Listening Project: *What the Church Is Saying* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee, 2006), 4, 22.

9 *Loving Strangers as Ourselves: Biblical Reflections* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee, 2006), 27.

10 MCC US Listening Project: *What the Church Is Saying*, 14-15.

11 These and other myths are discussed factually and succinctly in Yoji Cole, "Debunking 10 Myths about Immigrants," *DiversityInc* (September 2007), 51-54.

12 Cesar E. Chavez, "The Mexican-American and the Church" (Sacramento, CA: Second Annual Mexican Conference, March 8-10, 1968); available online from [www.farmworker-movement.org](http://www.farmworker-movement.org).

13 Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

14 John Micklethwait, "In God's Name," *The Economist* (November 3, 2007), 10.

15 "Centrifugal Forces," *The Economist* (July 16, 2005), 4.

16 Neil Pierce, "Immigrants Wanted: Stalled Cities Beg for Vitality," *Fresno Bee* (May 16, 2004), F1.



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