

“IS IT EASIER TO ‘GO’?” THE COMPLEXITIES OF THE PROTESTANT CHURCH IN EUROPE AND MIGRANT MISSION

By

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After four centuries of varied reformed movements, Protestantism was established in Europe by the 16th century. Although the beginnings of European colonization coincided with the widespread gains of Protestantism in Europe, it would take another two centuries before Protestant Christianity¹ would strategically pursue the missionary mandate to “Go to into all the world.”

In the early centuries of colonization, Roman Catholicism complemented the Spanish and Portuguese explorers and colonists and performed mass indigenous baptisms known as conversions. Protestantism similarly accompanied their European colonizers but did not evangelize the indigenous populations because of their racist assumptions. Mission historians have acknowledged the pioneers’ attempts at Protestant missions in Asia,² but none have questioned that the beginning of a structured global mission to indigenous populations is credited to the Moravians of Herrnhut, Germany, in 1732.

With the formation of mission societies³ which were focused on the conversion of non-Christians, and a renewed evangelistic zeal, of the eighteenth century, the stage was set for two centuries of explosive European Protestant missions in the Global South. The resulting extensive Christian influence and numerical expansion is best described as a “seismic shift in

¹ In this paper, Protestantism, European Protestantism, Protestant Christianity, and European Protestant Church/es will be used interchangeably to refer to the non-Catholic brand of Christianity that is traced to the 15th century but was shaped by the sixteenth century reformers.

² The Danish Mission of 1706 in South India

³ The London Missionary Society, 1795, Church missionary Society 1799, Basel Mission, 1815 etc.

world Christian Identity” (Encyclopedia of Global Christianity, xvii).” Because Protestant Christian missions were wholesome in nature and included education, healthcare, and social services, they were needed and valued in the Global South.

By the middle of the twentieth century, the emerging nationalism, independence, and self-determination in the Global South had provoked a review and critical analysis of European Protestant missions. Not only did the recipients of mission identify the imperfections and injuries of Protestantism, but they have re-claimed ownership of a pre-Europeanized Christianity that began in the Global South.⁴ Furthermore the records of history have revealed Protestantism as a racist structure that perpetuated oppression, manipulation, and exploitation. Protestant Christianity had succeeded in instilling cultural inferiority and self-negation.⁵

While the physical presence of Europeans, including missionaries, may have decreased, in recent decades, in the Global South, the legacy is unerasable. There has been a plethora of scholarly reasons for the fortitude of Christianity in the Global South. European Christians are not hesitant to opine that Churches in the Global South are growing primarily because the people are yet poor, uneducated, unhealthy and for some even uncivilized. Contrastingly, the limited local missions in Europe and the shrinking membership in the Churches, is attributed to the unrestricted access that people have to resources to meet human needs. As such, this reduces and even eliminates the need for the Christian gospel and evangelization in Europe. This, for the Europeans is a reality, but is not necessarily considered a failure.

This general European outlook of global Christianity, in my opinion, is the at the core of persistent racist ideologies and practices. However, the changing trends in global mission

⁴ See *Roots of Color in Christianity* by Timothy Welch, (ECGS)

⁵ *Overcoming Self-Negation: The Church and Junkanoo in Contemporary Bahamian Society* by Carlton Turner (Pickwick Publications, 2020)

with the growing migration to Europe has made inescapable the conversation on Protestant Christianity and the multi-cultural, multi-racial Church of God. The presence of migrant⁶ Christians in Europe has created complexities that are yet evolving between the once “sending Churches” and the “receiving missions.” In reflection on this I will limit this multi-layered discussion as follows:

1. Migrant: Too numerous and too powerful
2. Europe: Less abroad more at home
3. The Church: The Welcomed Stranger?
4. What good is faith?

Migrants: “Too numerous and too powerful”

Migrant Christianity is not new. The early Christians migrated across continents and most notably European Christians migrated to the Americas. However, in recent decades, the migration of Christians from the Global South to Europe has been rapid, visible, and viable. There is no exact date for the start of migrants in Europe, but according to Benjamin Simon, by the eighteenth century, “it became fashionable amongst the Prussian nobility to buy African children (Simon, *So in Christ*, 50).” Migration in different forms continued throughout Europe but from the 1950s migration began in earnest for varied reasons. The European community has signed on to several migrant treaties but has also experienced a growing nationalism that provided challenges for the migrant in general and migrant Christians, specifically.⁷

To begin with, migrants, even in the context of the Christian Church, are often painted with one belittling brush. The image of the needy and the dependency syndrome of the Global

⁶ Migrant/s will be used in this paper to identify those who move from place to another to live. Like diaspora the term migrant has been receiving much pushback from those who have become naturalized citizens and descendants of migrants. It is believed that the term is intentionally used to create racial divide even in the Church.

⁷ See “Being Black in the EU Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey (FRA, 2019)

South is often at the fore of the European mind. Therefore the possibility of an equally qualified, experienced, and competent migrant does not come over an immediate consideration.

In their work, *Mapping Migration, Mapping Churches' Responses in Europe*, Jackson and Passarelli give definition to the complex nomenclature of migrants. Ranging from the asylum seeker to the naturalized citizen, they named 15 categories of migrants.⁸ Though the distinctions are clear theoretically, according to Jackson and Passarelli, it is not “obvious nor evident” which category a particular migrant belongs. Most likely, migrants move through several phases of migration and are sacrificially committed to do so.

These recent figures point out that migrants and Christian migrants have etched out a relatively sizable space in Europe.

Migration in Europe 2020

	GERMANY	SWITZERLAND	NETHERLANDS	UNITED KINGDOM
Population	83 738900	8 654 600	17 1349 00	67 886 000
Migrant	15 762 457	2 491 249	2 358 333	9 359 587
Christians	54 980 405	6 300 460	6 740 739	45 386 218
Protestant migrants	1 370 000	300 000	230 000	1 135 000

Mapping Migrations

As European Protestantism reckons with its own diminishing numbers, the numerical growth among non-European Christians in Europe has gradually given the migrants both voice and vote. There are clearly differences in focus and vision in the expression of the Christian faith

⁸ Refugee, Asylum Seeker, internally displaced persons, Economic migrant, Highly skilled and Business migrants, Temporary Labor Migrants, Guest Workers, Seasonal Workers, Irregular migrants, Family Reunification, Citizen, Long-term resident, Transnational migrants, Diaspora, Third country nationals. Mapping Migration, 11

between the migrants and Europeans. The more liberal leaning agenda of the Europeans has been contested by the more conservative leaning migrant Christians. The search for a Christian response which does not disrupt Christian unity is neither simple nor easy. The migrant Christians have become too numerous and too powerful to overlook. This is a complexity.

Europe: Less Abroad, More at Home

As early as the 1840s the European Protestant Churches have been appealing to the mission churches to move towards self-autonomy and independence. This appeal was made based on depleting financial and human resources in Europe and the fact that Christianity had been present for more than a century in some countries. The story that has not been sufficiently researched or told was how European Protestantism had redirected its funding and staffing in support of the European diaspora throughout Europe.

Pockets of European Protestant migrants across Europe were sought out, cared for, and supported by the general Church fund. Preserving the pristine characteristics of European Protestantism may have already been more of a focus of the Protestant Church in the nineteenth century than whether the mission Churches were ready or able to be autonomous.

Reprimanded to “grow up” by the Europeans, former colonies and Christian churches alike have mostly become independent. Through several mission bodies and ecumenical communities, the concept of mission as a “one way street” has been changed to self-governing, self-propagating, and self-supporting. In response, the Protestant Churches in the Global South have shown much resilience in building up their communities but, to this day, they are no way close to sustainable development.

Ironically, it was the twentieth century that there was the explosive expansion of Protestant Christianity, especially in Eastern Africa. But even after the training and leadership of native

Christian workers, and the assumption of administrative roles, there has remained a supervisory and financial dependence on European nations and the Americans.

After centuries of European exploitation, most nations in the Global South are only now recognizing that their natural resources were enriching European nations while impoverishing their peoples. It is now broadly taught and known that colonialism extrapolated wealth from the Global South and has retained economic prowess through unfair policies and immoral practices. The Protestant Churches had also taken advantage of the indigenous peoples to fund their mission organizations, create wealth and build churches in Europe.⁹ In recent decades migrants have been exploited to rebuild cities destroyed after the second world war.

Colonialism and Protestant Christianity left a legacy of division, suspicion, unpreparedness, and corruption among the nations and Churches. Migration to Europe has also created discomfort and tensions (you've done your job-go back home).

Reparations, apologies, and compensations for such atrocities have been advocated by many groups and ecclesiastical undertakings like the Zacchaeus tax campaign.¹⁰ When Protestant Churches in Europe continue to reduce their donations to the global pool, demand that the once mission churches contribute more, and struggle to justify support of migrant churches, from their accumulative resources, it begs the question of the equality and equity in the body of Christ (Acts 4:34). This is a complexity.

The Church: A welcomed Stranger?

The initiative of the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME), founded in 1964 has challenged the European Church to a Christ-like response to the migrant

⁹ For example, monies from plantations in the Caribbean were used to build Anglican Churches in England.

¹⁰ The Zacchaeus Tax Campaign is a part of the New International Financial and Economic Architecture initiative, a joint project of the Council for World Mission, Lutheran World Federation, World Communion of Reformed Churches and World Council of Churches.

community. By monitoring the European policies on migration, the CCME communicates its concerns to churches and related institutions. At the most recent General Assembly in 2017, CCME acknowledged that migration has changed “the ecclesial landscape of European countries” and “that closer cooperation with migrant or minority ethnic churches will be important (p.24).”

	GERMANY	SWITZERLAND	NETHERLANDS	UNITED KINGDOM
Christianity	66.20%	73.70%	39%	68%
Attending monthly service	15.50%	12%	14.90%	11%
Percentage of migrant affiliated with religious organization	12%	16%	8.70%	24.10%
Percentage of Migrants attending religious services	3.60%	4.30%	2.30%	5.70%

Source: Mapping Migrations

The Migrants who settled into the European community have diverse cultural, social, and religious backgrounds. For those of Christian upbringing, it is not to be assumed, as the survey has shown, that they are active worshippers or have an interest in the institutionalized Church, although most would affirm a belief in God and Jesus Christ. In the context of a new land, the Church has been a place of hope for migrants. While ostracized from community the Church has been a place of welcome. At the same time, in some cases the Protestant Church has been unwelcoming and has continued to perpetuate racism and discrimination.

As the migrants process the dynamics of general migration, they have received mixed responses from the same Christian community that brought the gospel. Some have affirmed warm hospitality, acceptance, and assistance. Others who may have experienced the “kind and loving” missionary who came to share the goodness, are baffled by the “cold and indifference,” of the Church. Having welcomed the missionary as the stranger who shared a gospel of love, the migrant is not always welcomed as a stranger among the Christian community.

Some migrant Christians in Europe join churches that have historical longevity. Some join existing churches but also join fellowship meetings for people of their own nationality, culture, or language group. Some set up or join separate churches which meet the needs of other migrant Christians. Some of these newly formed churches belong to ecumenical bodies and networks, others do not. (The Church Towards a Common Vision: A Response, 6)

The Protestant migrants have found church homes in the context of Churches with which they are familiar. In cases where there has been intentional assimilation there has been a welcomed community and opportunities for participation and growth. Noteworthy is that aspirations to leadership or initiating specific ministries or projects have not been readily endorsed. There appears to be much comfort when the pastoral and key administrative leadership is white European or European American.

It is not uncommon for those who have a Protestant background to join non-denominational, international, and cultural churches. Some of these churches are not only more relevant in the messages but more helpful in attending to the needs of the whole person than Protestant Churches. In these churches, the vibrancy, growth, and fellowship give warmth to the stranger. Simon noted that in Germany these newly founded Churches were more Pentecostal in nature and “more easy to adjust to any context, even when the context is a rapidly

changing one.” (Simon, 54) Migrants have found the multi-language to be helpful and to worship especially when they can do so in their mother tongue.

Could it be that the Protestant community is more willing to fight fiercely to preserve “the territorial nature” of the Church than have diversity? While the unsuccessful “mission in reverse” must be noted, organizations like the Lausanne movement with less historic baggage are less restricted in forming a more global and inclusive work. But migrant Protestants would rather be part of an expression faith that they know while retaining their cultural and spiritual identities, values, and practices. They want to be welcomed strangers. This is a complexity.

What good is Faith?

There is no dearth of theories, theologies, or ecclesiastical models as a guide to being the Church together. The practice is lagging. I wish to suggest that as a Church that has taken initiative in crossing racial borders, that the Moravian Church, a historic Protestant Church, can be a model of faith by works. The result of going into the world is that Europe represents

Having been the home of migrant communities, for more than fifty years, the Moravian Church continues to a place of faith to those who have made Europe their home. It is not a perfect space but has been vulnerable as it facilitates a visible unity. This is affirmed in the responses received from Moravian leaders on the work in the European Continental Provinces and specifically the Netherlands and the British Province, specifically England.

I will conclude optimistically but cautiously preview the new work in Geneva Moravian Fellowship Switzerland and the lessons are that being learnt.

NETHERLANDS/GREAT BRITAIN

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| 1. How many churches have migrant (non-European origin) members? |
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*All Dutch congregations of the Moravian Church have members from non-European origin. In Zeist it is a minority. All the other congregations are predominantly migrant congregations.

**There are six (6) Churches where there are members. Four are in London and two in Birmingham. These are cities with migrant communities.

*** We have 30 congregations in the British Province, made up of 25 in England and 5 in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland is nearly fully Caucasian (Ulster Scots /Irish). In England, nearly there are six with a diverse make up and a further six that have migrant members but not a diverse membership.

2. Where are the migrants predominantly from?

*More or less all of the migrant members are from Suriname.

**They are predominantly from the Eastern Caribbean. Each Church has clusters of Caribbean connection. For example, Hornsey-Antigua, Harold Road-Jamaica, and Fetta Lane-Barbados.

*** The Caribbean, predominantly Jamaica, St Kitts & Nevis & Antigua

3. Are the migrants first or second generation?

*At this moment we have still first generation, but also second and third generation. But the members who are the most influential in the congregations are those of the first generation. The most of them of high age. This is one of our problems in reaching younger people.

** 85% of the population is first generation. The second generation attends in very small measure.

*** First generation

4. Do you have a period when the migrations started i.e., 1980s/1970s?

*The first were students coming from Suriname and settling in Amsterdam and Zeist un the early 60s. Later the big immigration came in the 70s/80s. A third (smaller) group came during the civil war in the 80s/90s of the 20th century.

**Migration from the Caribbean started increased from the 1960s when migrants came to assist with the rebuilding of Great Britain.

*** Beginning from the 1950s

5. How would you describe the integration?

*There is the question of language (All Surinamese people speak Dutch). That is an advantage when it comes to integration. But there are also experiences of prejudice, racism, exclusion that are obstacles in the process of integrations, and there are different values in the Surinamese culture and the Dutch.

**It has been found that when Blacks join Churches that there is a “white flight,” that is a moving away from the Church and the community. The Churches are not generally well integrated.

Black members do well with white leadership. And generally black-led churches are black with no or few whites.

In Ireland a black Pastor, pastors two predominantly white churches.

*** It is dependent on location. Many of our congregations are in rural areas, whereas when migrations started, congregations were strengthened in City centres and are more integrated. We have three congregations (Hornsey, Harold Road, & Fetter Land) where there had historically been churches, but numbers were dwindling and were revived by the arrival and ministry of the Windrush generation. In Birmingham and Leicester there was no Moravian work until it was started by ministers who had served in the Caribbean and newly arrived Moravians from Jamaica and Antigua. The congregation in Birmingham entered an ecumenical partnership in 2014 with a Methodist congregation which is predominated Caucasian. Due to urban growth and relocation, Leicester and Birmingham congregations are in locations where Caribbean, and the white population have left the areas and residents are mainly South Asian. It will be interesting to see if growth and evangelism are possible among these communities.

*Johannes Welschen (Netherlands), Provincial Board, EC Province

** Levingston Thompson (Ireland), Provincial Board, British Province

***Roberta Hoey, Chair, Provincial Board, British Province

Geneva Moravian Fellowship

In the Geneva, Switzerland context of a global community, the Geneva Moravian Fellowship was launched in December 2019. It is a fellowship connected with the Moravian Church in Switzerland and the European continental Province. The fellowship has a global and ecumenical audience with in-person from more than twenty countries. The on-line connection is a robust group spanning every continent. As a representation of the hope of Christ, this is the fellowship is a living faith for those who have come to study, work, and live in Switzerland. There is:

1. Identity. There is a familiarity with the traditional form of worship because they have been part of the older churches.
2. Acceptance. Although denominations differ there is a similarity in history and present struggle. Generally, the need is not money nor any personal aid but the need to be accepted and to be yourself.
3. Family. With many attendees being away from close relatives the fellowship has become a Fellowship. Birthday, marriages anniversaries, promotions and milestones are often celebrations. Concerns and burdens are equally shared.
4. Worship and Word. There is simplicity of worship and focus on Bible teachings. This eliminates the trappings of ecclesiastical traditions and focuses on the Word of God.
5. Global prayer. The Ministries connects virtually through global prayer. Where there are disasters and concerns in the world there is meeting for prayer.
6. Pastoral care. Some who have attended other Protestant Churches have said that you remain a visitor for many years. Conversely, they sense a pastoral care that remains connected outside of the worship space.
7. Global mission. Through this network there is outreach to mission e.g., long-term to Myanmar, Albania, short term to St Vincent in the time of disaster.

Conclusion

When Bishop John Gatu of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, in 1971 proclaimed ‘Missionaries go home!’ it was a call for the indigenous leaders to be free to assume greater responsibility for their work. However, as migrants have been now joined the missionaries in Europe, this has forged a rethinking of global and intercultural missions. Beyond sharing rental of space, the Protestant Church has the great opportunity to positively engage the complexities of migrant Christianity and show respect to fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. This widening of the missionary mandate to Go into all the world, presents a time for healing, restoring and visibly unity the body of Christ.

FOR FURTHER READING

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