

Reaching Strangers among Us

Ideas for beginning diaspora ministry in your church

By Ellen Livingood

We believe God wants to use every local church to reach out to the strangers in their midst. To help you get started, in this *Postings* we have collected some thought-provoking, shorter articles and suggestions.

The term frequently used to refer to immigrant peoples is diaspora, from the Greek word for scattered or dispersed.

The diaspora includes refugees, immigrants, and international students. Doubtless, some live quite near you. ***Don't wait until you have more time or feel better prepared to begin to reach them.*** God has brought these new neighbors to your doorstep. He can use you to reach them now!

Beginning Outreach to the Strangers among Us

God told the Israelites, "The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt." (Lev. 19:34 NIV).

So how could your church begin to reach out to the "foreigner residing among you"? You don't need to become an expert in Islam or know all of the tenants of Hinduism before you begin. Remember that God's command is to "love them," and that requires just a smile and a "Hello!" to get started. You can learn as you go; just cross the street!

1 Begin to discover your neighbors.

Find out what peoples are living in your area. The www.PeopleGroups.info website may be helpful. From what country do international students come who attend nearby universities? Contact the international students office of the university to gather information about their students and programs.

2 Build a prayer team.

Find out if God is laying diaspora peoples on the hearts of individuals in your church. Invite your congregation to participate in an introductory meeting. See if you can launch a regular prayer team specifically around this ministry opportunity.



3 Pursue relationships.

You may be surprised to discover that your diaspora community already has a church. Or there may be other churches focused on ministering to these people. Build friendships with everyone who shares your heart for reaching these people. Learn from them and encourage them.

Begin reaching out to make diaspora friends. It's okay to admit to them that you are new at developing relationships with people from different cultures. You

can learn together!

4 Expand your culture-crossing skills.

There is much to learn as you begin to love the diaspora peoples among you. ***But don't be overwhelmed; just learn as you go. Stay focused on the friendship aspect of ministry*** by reading books like Miriam Adeney's [Daughters of Islam](#) and ISI's booklets such as [Reaching Hindu International Students](#).

5 Be prepared for push back.

Expect that fear and misunderstanding may make many people hesitant at first to reach out to those of different cultures. Be ready for questions such as:

- *What if I can't understand what they say?*
- *What if I reach out and they don't respond?*
- *Is it right for our country to allow so many of these people to come and live here?*
- *Why don't they just adopt our culture and way of life?*

Who Lives near You?

Here is a challenging story about just one of the hundreds of people groups represented by burgeoning diaspora communities. As you read it, consider what people God has brought to your community that He wants you to love for His sake. Could you write a similarly powerful story about what you believe God wants to do among that community?

Living Water for Somalis

Somalia, the country known for pirates and camels, also boasts a population that is over 99% Muslim, placing it among the most Muslim nations in the world.

Unique, however, is that fact that Somalia has had over 40% of its population displaced in recent years due to civil war.

Somalis fled to refugee camps in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Yemen, and have made their way to American states such as Minnesota, California,

Georgia, Maine, and Washington. They are here in numbers so significant that they demand our notice and attention.

Over 3,000 Somalis now call Lewiston, ME, home, and over 10,000 have made their way to San Diego, CA. Even larger concentrations of Somali immigrants can be found in Seattle, WA, and Columbus, OH. **However, the largest populations of Somalis in North America are in Toronto and Minneapolis/St. Paul, both of which contain an estimated 60-80,000 Somalis.**

They come with a history of trauma, often struggling with depression from the war and the loss of so much. Many

come with a radical faith—from environments in which Sharia law is strictly enforced. They come with large families, or what remains of them, but little in terms of material or educational means. As they struggle to make sense of a new land, many Somali immigrants also face prejudice and cultural misunderstanding. Their strict adherence to Islam isolates them in their new country.

A Somali proverb says, "Only water in your hands can satisfy your thirst."

But Jesus once told a foreign woman at a well that "Whoever drinks from the water that I will give him will never get thirsty again—ever! In fact, the water I give him will

become a well of water springing up within him for eternal life." (Jn. 4:14)

What if God uprooted a nation and inserted them into ours so that they could find Water that would never leave them thirsty again? How satisfying would that Water be for their thirst? Who will put it in their hands?

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Missiologist and researcher Justin Long points out some important factors to remember as we minister to diaspora peoples:

How Mission to the Nations among Us Fits into the Big Picture

The nations are coming to us. Some are coming to escape oppression at home, some for work, some to study, some to take advantage of opportunity, some to move their money. In this incredible wave of migration, individuals from some previously staunchly unreached peoples have moved right into the same neighborhood as Western churches.

Obviously, we need to reach out to them, and encourage others to reach out to them as well. But we need to hold some things firmly in view as we do.

Just because they come from an "unreached" country doesn't mean they are non-Christians.

The fact that they moved to a more-Christian region may mean that they are less like their homeland. For example, there has been a mass exodus of Christians and more liberal, secularized people from the Middle East. The Iranian down the street from you may in fact be a Christian, not a Muslim.

Different segments of the diaspora have different positions in society, and may only be here a limited time.

Our strategies ought to take this into account. Consider the different categories: visiting professionals, students, entrepreneurs, migrant workers, asylum-seekers, illegals, and the trafficked. Each of these are in significantly different situations which require different approaches. These different types may equally have different levels of influence or connectedness back to their home culture.

Multiple generations of a diaspora acclimate to be more like the culture around them, requiring different strategies to reach them.

You've probably had the experience: You hear Indian par-

ents talking, and they sound like Indians; but then their children start talking to you—and they have the same accent as your kids. The first generation (who immigrated in) will have one set of cultural ideals (perhaps a large family, or trouble speaking your language, for example); but their children and their grandchildren have adopted the local language and cultural norms. Reaching the older generations will likely require a completely different strategy than reaching the younger ones.

Reaching the diaspora requires some training in cross-cultural ministry.

You would not go to the foreign mission field without some

level of training and preparation. Understanding world-view and culture is as important to reaching the diaspora as it is to reaching the least reached in their home countries.

Reaching the diaspora "here" does not

automatically mean impacting their home culture.

Think of the Persians of America and the Persians of Iran. Reaching Persians in America may lead to some connections to their families in Iran—or maybe not. It's not a given that the gospel will flow over that distance. It may be more likely with students and other itinerant workers who return home. Another situation is the person who goes to a foreign country, builds a business, gets rich, and then has influence back home.

Reaching diaspora peoples in Christian countries can be good training.

But the community you are engaging must be similar to the



...to escape oppression, for work, to study, to take advantage of opportunity...



one you'll be working with in their homeland. Reaching a fifth or sixth generation Korean American, for example, may be little different from reaching any other American, and tell you next to nothing about reaching Koreans in North Korea. However, there are communities where life is lived very much like the culture they left behind.



Some Introductory Resources

Good resources are multiplying. Here are a few to introduce your church to diaspora ministry.

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION: www.PeopleGroups.info (great maps locating key Diaspora communities; you can submit information about your region if it is lacking). Find additional statistics and interactive maps on these sites: "[The World Migration Report 2024](#)" and the [Migration Policy Institute's Total Immigrant and Emigrant Populations by Country](#) and [Immigrant and Emigrant Populations by Country of Origin and Destination](#)

PRAYER: [Justin Long's website](#) has an extensive list of prayer guides for various religious blocs, people groups, etc.

TRAINING: Check out the annual, one-day [Heart for Muslims](#) conference held in New York City. [InterVarsity's store](#) offers separate booklets on connecting with Hindu, Muslim, and Chinese international students.

DIGGING DEEPER: *Seeking Refuge: On the shores of the global refugee crisis* by Bauman, Soerens, and Smeir is a great resource to help your church begin thinking and responding biblically around the issues of immigration and refugees.

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