

Western Agency, Meet the Diaspora

A Conversation with John Baxter

A few months ago, the IJFM sat down with John Baxter of the Lausanne Movement's Global Diaspora Network to discuss the role of mission agencies in the context of the global diaspora. The following is the fruit of that interaction.

IJFM: *What is it about diaspora mission that is challenging our mission structures today?*

There are essentially two mission realities that have been with us a while, but are now intensifying and growing in importance. First, I'd say that diaspora missions is refining the people group mission focus. It recognizes that increasingly large numbers of people from unreached people groups are now outside of their homelands. The experience of migration affects not only the identity of those within people groups but also our strategies for reaching them. It makes a people group focus more complicated in that migration mixes groups in their new locales. Overall this begins to diminish the singular importance agencies have traditionally given to a specific geographical location in reaching a particular people. It pushes mission agencies out of their more sedentary focus to a more mobile focus on peoples. Diaspora mission also represents a second mission reality, perhaps even a new missions era, in the way it respects and harnesses the rising missionary energy of the majority world. It takes seriously the fact that a significant percentage of majority world missionaries will be informal workers. These Christians within the global diaspora reflect this demographic trend in Christianity worldwide.

So, it comes down to two mission realities. Agencies that work in the global diaspora find themselves having to shift from a narrow geographical focus and more fully embrace an affinity focus when targeting UPGs in migration. They're also having to determine how to connect their mission resources with a growing number of informal mission workers who do not fit into their present structures.

IJFM: *So, John, give us a sense for where you enter this whole challenge of diaspora.*

My concerns are very practical. Sending agencies around the world are presently engaged with migrating people groups, and I believe they're presented with a kairos moment. I want to see our mission agencies more able to

John Baxter, DMin, and his wife, Jan, are missionaries with Converge Worldwide. They have served in the central Philippines, training pastors and missionaries at the Cebu Graduate School of Theology. They also have worked with the Philippines Missions Mobilization Movement, providing training for Overseas Filipino Workers. John now serves as the Director of Converge Worldwide Diaspora Ministries, and as International Catalyst for the Global Diaspora Network of the Lausanne Movement.

empower local churches in the global south to lead in diaspora missions. The global diaspora is creating a distinctly lay movement in the global south, but most of our Western training structures and systems are structured for full-time Christian workers. So we must ask: How do we empower the local global south church to recruit, train, and provide on-going mentoring for global south Christians finding employment in the 10/40 Window? This is where I enter this whole conversation on diaspora.

IJFM: We've heard you use the words "effective engagement" in speaking of Western sending agency involvement in the global diaspora. Can you unpack this a little more?

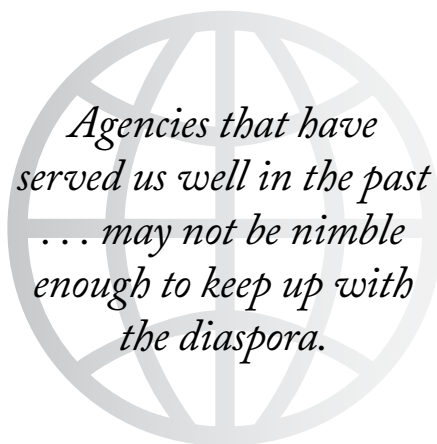
My concern is that our involvement as agencies, denominations and church networks be appropriate and contextually sensitive, so we don't harm a movement in progress. We need to get alongside this movement, and to do this effectively I believe three things are required: vision, structure and philosophy.

The first change is conceptual, a matter of vision. Do we as Western agencies see the diaspora both as a mission force and as a legitimate mission field? Diaspora as a global reality complicates matters and we may be reticent to study this issue and see through this complexity.

Let me elaborate this in a few ways. First, it can be disheartening to achieve success in reaching a UPG only to discover that the work is not finished because a large percentage of the people group is scattered globally, and that our outreach strategies may need to be significantly adapted in many of these diaspora contexts. Secondly, we can be so single-focused on a UPG in a mission field that we are blind to the other migrating UPGs that God is sending among us. Thirdly, we can be blind to the resources in the form of migrating majority world Christians that God is sending to our established fields. Some agencies continue sending missionaries

to re-evangelize Europe, but have yet to seriously investigate the potential roles of global south Christians living in Europe who are resources themselves.

It reminds me of one Sunday morning when my wife and I were riding the trains through Paris, going from the airport to the town of Evry, thirty kilometers to the south. We passed through neighborhoods inhabited by immigrants from North and Sub-Saharan Africa. On that early Sunday morning (while most native French were still at home), the train was filled with Francophone Africans dressed in Sunday attire and carrying Bibles. These believers—from places such as Côte d'Ivoire or Congo-DRC—were on their way to church.



As we rode along I wondered why my own agency, which works in France, has never investigated working with these immigrant Christians. While recognizing the social and economic barriers that separate them from the native French, and to a lesser degree from other immigrant groups, we remain ignorant of their potential for evangelizing their neighbors.

What can they do? What are their real limitations? Is there anything we can do to help remove some of these limitations? This is a conceptual shift. Do we see the Christian Francophone Africans living in France as a resource for reaching both the native French and other migrant groups there? We

will not really know what they may be able to do until someone has been tasked with finding out.

IJFM: And we assume this brings us to the structure of our mission agencies?

Yes. I am asking my agency to send personnel to France to work with these immigrant groups as a resource for missions, not a target for church planting or evangelism. Most likely our agency missionary will come from Francophone Africa (and not North America), thereby creating a wonderful mess of our present geographic mission structure.

If agencies are to have a role here, we must address the change required in our structures. Do our systems hinder our ability to work with the global diaspora? Can Western agencies remodel to fit an affinity focus? Are we flexible enough for this strategic vision?

It is far easier to adopt the motto, "From everywhere to everywhere," than to actually do it as a mission agency. When an affinity focus is adopted, the organizational structures of geographically-based agencies become cumbersome. For example, if we are no longer sending missionaries to Japan but to the Japanese, how can the old field structure based in Tokyo oversee and resource work in Brazil? How does the Japanese team in Brazil interact with the agency missionaries to the majority Brazilian population? What if they don't speak the same language? Which field provides resources, oversight and funding? Are turf wars inevitable?

Flexibility is a key issue. People on the move tend to stay on the move. A thriving immigrant community may quickly shift to a new location, even a new country, if political and economic conditions change. Agencies that have served us well in the past where we can expect a stable situation may not be nimble enough to keep up with the diaspora.

So, agencies that take on diaspora missions will face personnel issues. North American sending agencies need

to deploy missionaries from within the diaspora to work both in North America and globally. If it is true that the diaspora is best at reaching the diaspora, then recruitment, funding, and deployment by North American agencies becomes a priority. The best missionary to work among a diaspora community may be from an immigrant background or may not even be from America. Unfortunately, most North American agencies have a poor track record in this area.

IJFM: We've heard you talk a lot about the role of agencies in training. What's happening in this area?

The delivery of mission resources changes in diaspora missions. Most agencies are structured to deliver their training and personnel resources in contexts more suited to those whose primary and full-time focus is ministry. Going to a seminary or gathering for regular training meetings in a central location are traditional examples. But the diaspora does not connect in this manner. Resources must be delivered to people who are focused on secular work and who will not attend a Bible college or seminary. Most of them do not see themselves as missionaries and will not initially be seeking training anyway. Agencies must re-envision the content and delivery of training resources. The two most important contact points with such people are in their local church before they leave and in their new diaspora community in their new country. Can we shift our resources to those points?

For example, North American denominations typically center their systems for leadership development in theological schools in which students have the necessary background, time, and financial resources to be trained. Overseas secular workers in these countries find it very difficult to connect with our training venues. If an agency wishes to provide leadership training for Christians in the global diaspora, it must adjust its delivery systems to

Most of them do not see themselves as missionaries and will not initially be seeking training anyway.

the academic levels and interests of the diaspora and find new access points to deliver this training.

The church in the Philippines is a prime example. They have recognized the importance of diaspora missions for many years, and have begun to create pre-departure training for Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). Some of the evangelical churches in the Manila area have created their own programs. The Philippines Mission Association has created the Philippines Missions Mobilization Movement (PM3) to help local churches train and care for their OFWs. The PM3 format is four one-day seminars that typically involve several churches. While this is a good start, more can be done.

The best venue for pre-departure training of OFWs is in the local church through a mentoring relationship. Returnee OFWs can mentor potential OFWs concerning family and financial matters, discipleship training, cross-cultural communication training, and on-going accountability relationships with the sending church. Overseas accountability is possible through the Internet and cell phones.

IJFM: So is the Western agency more of a broker for training in this diaspora mission?

Yes. This need for training is a possible link between the Western mission agency and the diaspora. Agencies continue to play an important role in the training of pastors in many of these majority world countries that are sending secular workers into the 10/40 Window. Western agencies can help equip pastors to begin a diaspora missions ministry in the local church. This training can be either formal or informal. It should be seen as part of the practical theology curriculum and not

just a missions topic. Just as we help train pastors to start churches, preach, counsel, and have small group ministry, we can also help ensure that when they finish their training program they are able to set up a diaspora missions ministry in the local church.

IJFM: What kind of responsiveness are we expecting from the Filipino churches?

One of the positives of this local church training approach is that a large impact is possible even if there is limited buy-in from local churches and denominational partners. There are at least 700,000 evangelical Filipinos in the global diaspora, hundreds of thousands in the 10/40 Window. If only 10 percent of the sending Filipino churches created training and accountability programs, it would result in tens of thousands of equipped Filipino disciples entering into least-reached areas. Add to this all the other majority world countries sending overseas workers in the 10/40 Window and Europe, and you can see that the potential for more trained workers numbers in the tens of thousands.

IJFM: So what would you say are the important elements to what you call a philosophy of diaspora mission?

Vision and structure work from an informed philosophy, and our philosophy will determine our effective engagement with the diaspora. There's one crucial (and very often ignored) ingredient in an effective philosophy: vulnerability.

We have to ask whether Western agencies can learn to work from weakness instead of technological and methodological strength. The global diaspora arises out of poverty and those involved are usually in a place of vulnerability. Can Western agencies learn how to serve and not lead a missions endeavor? This is a majority world movement,

and Western agencies are not in charge of it, so we must adopt the posture of a servant as we work in partnership with these majority world churches.

IJFM: Can you expand on this idea of weakness?

Caring for those in the diaspora has to be a part of our agenda. The global diaspora has arisen in a context of fallenness, weakness, and sorrow. People are on the move because of war, natural calamity and poverty. The context of diaspora missions is not only a place of weakness, it is a place of pain. A great deal of psychological dysfunction exists among those who have left home and those who have stayed behind. Most of the workers we hope to see in fruitful ministry are dealing with the pain and guilt of family separation. They have left spouses and children behind to earn a living or to escape intolerable conditions. A profound sense of dislocation accompanies those who are scattered. Agencies are well advised to care for the whole person when working in the diaspora. Can we love them instead of just using them for our mission strategy? I believe this is where the national sending churches play such a pivotal role.

IJFM: You talked earlier about issues of deployment. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

I will add a couple other elements. We should understand that all these diaspora ramifications in mission are part of a transition from an "Anglo" to a multi-cultural North American sending profile. This is a pragmatic question for me. The growing edge of the church in North America is no longer Anglo. If we do not learn how to mobilize and empower this "growing edge" for cross-cultural missions, we may find ourselves out of the game.

Diaspora missions also offers an opportunity to move from paternalism to partnership. I was eating a sandwich at a Tim Hortons restaurant in Toronto. Next to me were four young Chinese men talking about spiritual things. I

introduced myself and inquired about their conversation. Two of the young men were Mormon missionaries from China evangelizing the other two. Both missionaries became Mormons in their hometown in China and were sent to evangelize Chinese in Canada. Notice: China to Canada. East to West. We can ask for help from our overseas church partners in evangelizing the nations among us in North America. We can recruit from diasporic groups within North America to reach the UPGs within our borders. The diaspora is best at reaching the diaspora.

IJFM: Any concluding thoughts?

While it may seem strange to place this as a final point, I need to say it:



*This is their story;
we can't write it
for them.*

Diaspora missions is a God thing. We did not create the global diaspora. Our focus should simply be where is God working, and we should be ready to come alongside. After we are engaged we can better ask what we might expect. Can the evangelistic opportunities afforded to Christians in the diaspora be leveraged into church planting, or even church planting movements?

The truth is that we do not know at this time what diaspora missions can accomplish. We are just beginning to study this emerging strategy. We will not know what God can do through the diaspora unless we take the risk of restructuring our work to intentionally and actively engage with people on the

move. We must collaborate as agencies to learn from each other. We must become knowledgeable practitioners by fusing academic studies and on-going experimentation in order to define fruitful practices for the diaspora.

What we do know is that we did not create it. No agency put the millions of the majority world in motion, bringing millions from UPGs into contact with the gospel as they move to lands with an evangelical church, and sending millions of majority world Christians into unreached lands as secular workers. It appears to be a God thing. Henry Blackaby would ask us to see where God is already working and seek to join him; this is the essence of diaspora missions.

These are the issues I hope to work on in the days ahead. There are other important issues, such as returnee problems, that need to be addressed. I want to push Western agencies to assist the global south church to solve these problems. But this is their story; we can't write it for them. **IJFM**