

Reaching the Strangers Next Door Through Apostolic Church Planting

J. D. Payne

J. D. Payne, is associate professor of Christian Ministry at Samford University. He has published several books on missions and evangelism including *Strangers Next Door: Immigration, Migration, and Mission*, and *Apostolic Church Planting: Birthing New Churches from New Believers*.

If the twentieth century was called the “Age of Migration,” then such an appellation could easily be applied to the twenty-first century.¹ The overall numbers of people on the move continue to increase. The movement of people groups frequently makes appearances among media outlets. In fact, as I read my news feed prior to writing this introduction, Reuters and National Public Radio ran the following articles: “India’s Rohingya Refugees Struggle with Hatred, Fear as First Group is Expelled” and “Stunning Photos Depict Migrants ‘As They’d Rather be Seen.’”²

Some people travel freely from their countries of birth, while others who suffer at the hand of persecutors and warmongers flee with hearts terror-filled. The purpose of this article is to provide a glimpse of the global reality of migration by examining some of the most recent numbers of migrants, theologically reflect on migration and the *Missio Dei*, and advocate for an apostolic approach to church planting among people living far from their countries of birth.

Global Realities of Peoples on the Move

Most people in the world do not migrate. However, if all of the international migrants represented a single nation, they would constitute the fifth largest country in the world. In 2017, there were 258 million international migrants throughout the world.³ This number represents a little more than three percent of the world’s population. Most migration occurs between countries in close proximity to one another (e.g., Mexicans moving to the United States, Ethiopians moving to Kenya). Approximately half of all international migrants continue to live in the region of their birth.⁴

Asia is the birthplace of the largest number of migrants living outside of their birth region. Of the 42 million migrants born in Asia In 2017, 20 million were living in Europe, 17 million in Northern America, and 3 million in Oceania. The second

largest number, 32 million, were born in Latin America and the Caribbean. Of these, 26 million were living in Northern America and 5 million in Europe.⁵

Over half of the world's international migrant population resides in just ten countries.⁶ For decades, the United States has been home to the largest number of migrants, presently with nineteen percent (see Table 1) of the global population. Saudi Arabia and Germany, the second and third largest recipients, receive less than five percent of this population.

Country	International Migrants (millions)
United States	50
Saudi Arabia	12
Germany	12
Russian Federation	12
United Kingdom	9
United Araba Emirates	8
France	8
Canada	8
Australia	7
Spain	6
Italy	6
India	5

Table 1. Countries with the Largest Numbers of International Migrants⁷

From a missiological perspective, at least two matters are worth noting about the numbers in Table 1. First, the global migrant population represents the world's major religious systems, no religious preferences, and many lesser religious traditions. It should be noted that Christians are also on the move. Second, large numbers representing unreached people groups are moving to western countries. Eight are traditionally western countries and, at least for now, Christians still have the freedom to walk across the street and share their faith with unbelievers. Governmental opposition and local persecution are minimal.

An examination of the countries providing the largest numbers of migrants is found in Table 2. India and China, the two most populous countries, make first and fourth place, respectively. Mexico is the second largest sending country in terms of numbers, followed by the Russian Federation. While Christians are found in every country in the world, a simple glance at this table reveals that most of the countries are home to exceedingly large numbers of unreached people groups. A very high

probability exists that among migrants departing such countries, many of them do not have a relationship with the God of the universe.

Countries/Areas	International Migrants (millions)
India	17
Mexico	13
Russian Federation	11
China	10
Bangladesh	8
Syrian Arab Republic	7
Pakistan	6
Ukraine	6
Philippines	6
United Kingdom	5
Afghanistan	5
Poland	5

Table 2. Largest Countries/Areas of Birth for International Migrants in 2017⁸

Students and Refugees

Two categories of international migration are worth mentioning. Students and refugees, while radically different in terms of reasons for transition and identities, are also on the move in large numbers. International students conducting undergraduate studies abroad are generally excited about their pursuits, while refugees are among the neediest people on the planet.

Students

Every year large numbers of students leave their countries of birth to study in other countries. While space will not allow for a global examination of international students, this article will reference what is taking place in the United States.

For the past several years, the United States has been receiving record numbers of international students studying at colleges and universities. The 2016-2017 enrollment reached an all-time high at 1,078,822. An examination of Table 3 shows the locations of the largest numbers of international students. China and India have taken the first and second places for sending the most students to the United States. Their positions have changed little in the past few years. Large numbers of South Korean students call U.S. colleges and universities home for a few years of their lives. The government of Saudi Arabia sends the fourth largest number of students to this country.

Country	Number of Students
China	351,000
India	186,000
South Korea	59,000
Saudi Arabia	53,000
Canada	27,000
Vietnam	22,000
Taiwan	22,000
Japan	19,000
Mexico	17,000
Iran	13,000

Table 3. Largest Sending Countries of International Students to the United States, 2016-17⁹

From a Kingdom perspective, the reader should be quick to notice that most of these countries are home to extremely large numbers of unreached people groups. Every year, unreached people groups are studying in both small and large U.S. colleges and universities. Many of these students are not only open to receiving a western education, but are receptive to exposure to western culture and religion. Unfortunately, very few of these unreached students will ever be invited into an American's home or hear the gospel from someone who cares for them.

Refugees

The refugees of the world are among the most destitute and neediest people on the planet. They have been forced to flee their countries of birth due to “well-founded fear of persecution, conflict, violence, or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order, and who, as a result, require international protection.”¹⁰ Not everyone who flees a country is necessarily a refugee. To receive refugee status, a person must become an asylum seeker. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has a strict definition for asylum seekers and refugees, a definition to which most countries subscribe.

Sixty-nine million people world-wide are considered forcibly displaced from their homes. Of this number, forty million are internally displaced within their own countries. However, twenty-nine million forcibly displaced people are refugees and asylum-seekers.¹¹ In 2016, Turkey was home to the largest number at three million, followed by Jordan, and the State of Palestine.

Country	Refugees/Asylum Seekers (millions)
Turkey	3
Jordan	3
State of Palestine	2
Lebanon	2
Pakistan	1
Germany	1
Uganda	1

Table 4. Countries with Largest Numbers of Refugees and Asylum Seekers, 2016¹²

Compared to the global numbers, the United States receives a very small number of refugees each year. While the majority of refugees arriving here are Christians, many refugees are Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists, or have no religious preference. Refugees have needs for friendship, assistance with cultural acquisition to the United States and language learning – needs most churches are capable of meeting to some degree.¹³

Migration and the *Missio Dei*

People migrate for various reasons. Some migrants leave their country of birth in search of employment or school. Others desire to improve the quality of life for their families. Some people are forced to flee because of war, famine, or persecution. These socio-cultural “push-pull” factors are studied widely by social scientists to explain the reasons people move from country-to-country.

The Scriptures make a divine case for the movement of peoples on earth. God is a missionary God and His mission has always involved migration. From the very beginning, He desired that the world would be filled with His image bearers to bring Him glory. The first humans were told to “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1:28).

Following the flood, Noah and his family heard similar words: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen 9:1). When people stopped migrating and desired to build a name for themselves (Gen 11:2, 4), God came down to Shinar, confused their language, and “dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth” (Gen 11:9).

The storyline throughout the Old Testament of Israel is a story of migration. In the gospels, migration plays an important role. Jesus and His family fled persecution to fulfill prophecy (Matt 2:13-15). The dispersion of the Jews and the establishment of their communities across the world by the time of Jesus was significant in the spread of the gospel. The fulfillment of Joel 2:28-29 occurred during Pentecost when Jews from every nation (Acts 2:5) were dwelling in Jerusalem and then returned home with the good news.

Acts 17:26-27 makes a special contribution to a proper understanding of the mission of God and migration. While in Athens, Paul was brought to the Areopagus to share his teaching. During his message he made the following statement:

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us.

From this passage, the apostle made it clear that God is sovereign over His creation. He is the Creator of all people. He is also sovereign over people's histories. He knows when they will live and move and have their being (Acts 17:28). He determines the rise and fall of nations. God is also sovereign over the locations where people will reside. Moving beyond these characteristics of Divinity, Paul reveals the reason for such divine oversight: created beings are to seek and find God.

The implications for the Great Commission are evident in this passage. Kingdom citizens must recognize their places of residence should be used for a divine purpose and intentionality. If unbelievers live nearby, then certainly here is a wonderful opportunity for the believer to be a part of helping those next door "seek... and find Him."

What in the World is the Divine Maestro Doing?

When I wrote *Strangers Next Door: Immigration, Migration, and Mission*, I referred to God as the Divine Maestro who orchestrates the movement of the nations.¹⁴ While migration is nothing new, the scale on which it has been occurring in the 20th and 21st centuries has been rapid and grand. Migration is from everywhere to everywhere. Asians are moving to Africa. South Americans are moving to Europe. Europeans are moving to Asia. Space will not allow a thorough discussion of these regional patterns. Once again, I want to draw attention to the movement of peoples to North America.

While the greatest needs for the gospel and church planting are outside of the West in general and North America in particular, migration has resulted in large numbers of unreached people groups arriving on this continent. Sadly, such numbers are rarely known and this reality is rarely discussed among evangelicals. Behind India and China, the United States is home to the third largest number of unreached people groups in the world. Canada ranks sixth for the largest numbers of unreached people groups behind Indonesia (see Table 5).

Country	Unreached People Groups
India	1514
China	337
United States	282
Brazil	181
Indonesia	172
Canada	167

Table 5. Countries with the Largest Numbers of Unreached People Groups¹⁵

The Church in North America lives at a unique time in history. The opportunities to take the gospel across the world are everywhere. Advances in politics, medicine, technology, and travel have created highways on which the Church can travel to make disciples of all nations. Jesus has told us to go into every part of the world. At the same time, the Divine Maestro has brought large numbers of unreached people groups to our neighborhoods, schools, and offices.

The great evangelical oversight related to these groups has resulted in ministerial neglect. The majority of these groups have not been engaged with an intentional church planting strategy (Table 6). Of the 282 groups in the United States, 207 are unengaged and unreached. Of the 167 groups residing in Canada, 141 are unengaged and unreached.

Country	Unengaged Unreached People Groups
United States	207
Canada	141

Table 6. Estimated Unengaged Unreached People Groups in U.S. and Canada¹⁶

Taking an Apostolic Approach

While we have many ways to reach unreached people groups, the remainder of this article will advocate an apostolic church planting approach for engagement, discipling, training, and sending.¹⁷ This section will address biblical church planting and what is involved in an apostolic approach. I will conclude with a few strategic thoughts for helping churches take the first step toward reaching the strangers next door.

Evangelism that Results in New Churches

Church planting in the West is a complex and complicated ministry. It is founded on large financial subsidies and high capacity leaders who, in general, advocate strategies and methods that are difficult to reproduce. The biblical model

is just the opposite. Church planting in the New Testament is simple, highly reproducible, and inexpensive.

Biblical church planting involves evangelism that results in new churches. It begins with an apostolic team—a small group of believers sent with the gospel to make disciples. It does not begin with a pastor who attempts to gather long-term, Kingdom citizens to start an instant church and then to be missional in the community. The biblical model is just the opposite. Churches are birthed from the fields of lostness, not from the shuffling of saints around in the Kingdom.

Sowers, Seed, Soil, and Spirit

In Paul's first letter to the Church in Thessalonica, he described what was necessary for the Thessalonians to come into the Kingdom and what happened after their conversion:

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything (1 Thes. 1:4-8).

The gospel penetrated the hearts of the people. New believers, following the model established by the team, were able to disseminate the Word throughout two provinces. Reflecting on this passage with alliteration, Charles Brock noted all that was needed for the birth of the church was the sowers (team), soil (Thessalonians), seed (gospel), and Spirit.¹⁸

An examination of the book of Acts and other select passages in the Pauline literature also reveals a very simple approach to first century disciple making and church planting. The apostolic team was not satisfied with planting a single church. Global disciple-making was the operating principle.

Pathway to Planting

A study of the first missionary journey (Acts 13-14) reveals a pathway to planting followed by the apostolic team. The pattern was predictable and involved at least four steps (see Figure 1).

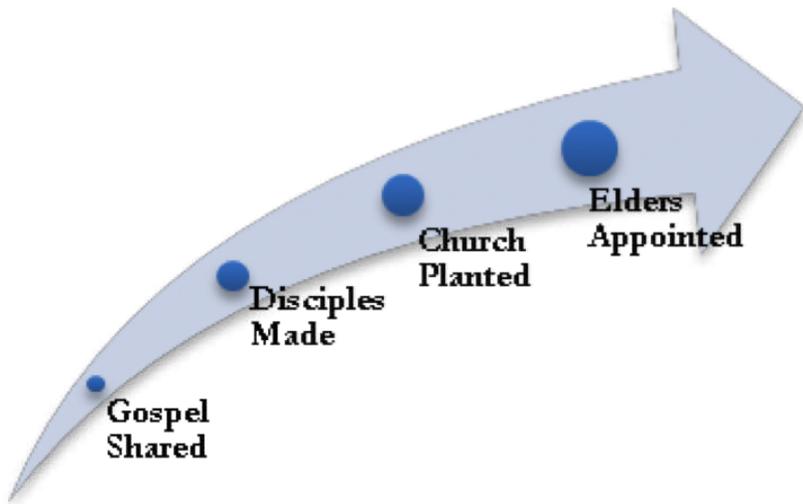


Figure 1. Pathway to Planting¹⁹

First, the team would enter into a community and share the gospel. Second, people who repented and placed faith in Jesus were called disciples. Third, those disciples, whether in Derbe, Lystra, or Iconium were identified as the local expression of the Body of Christ. Finally, the apostolic team appointed elders for those newly planted churches. At the conclusion of the first missionary journey, Luke gives evidence of these four steps:

When they *had preached* the gospel to that city and *had made many disciples*, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. And when they *had appointed elders* for them *in every church*, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed (Acts 14:21-23, emphasis mine).

This pathway provides additional insight into the apostolic work in Ephesus and on Crete. For example, when Paul called for the Ephesian elders to meet with him in Miletus (Acts 20:17), the church is in place with her pastoral leaders. Only later is Timothy sent to the city to work with the church and its elders. The savage wolves had apparently engaged (Acts 20:19) and, in addition to several tasks, Timothy was to set an example before the church (1 Tim 4:12) and work with faithful men to develop other leaders (2 Tim 2:2). In addition to developing ecclesiastical order, Titus had the privilege of raising up elders for the churches planted in the towns on the island of Crete (Titus 1:5).

A Foundation Where There is No Foundation

An apostolic approach begins with the unbeliever. Paul summarized this conviction that among all of the people and places in the world to serve, he made it his “ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named” (Rom. 15:20). Drawing support from Isaiah 52:15, he wanted to avoid building on “someone else’s foundation,” so that “those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand” (Rom. 15:20, 21; cf. Isaiah 52:15).

If an apostolic approach were embraced by the Church in North America, priority would be given to the unengaged and unreached people groups. Instead, contemporary evangelical church planting focuses on planting churches among reached people groups. It follows the opposite direction of the biblical pathway to planting (see Figure 1). Priority is given to starting churches rather than planting churches from the harvest fields. The Divine Maestro has moved the peoples of the world to North America, but His Church has largely ignored them.

A Response to Reaching the Strangers Next Door

Whether it is Moroccans arriving in Paris, Syrians living in a refugee camp in Turkey, or Chinese students studying in the United States, migration has provided numerous opportunities for the church to make disciples of all nations. With so many opportunities to engage the strangers next door, churches often find themselves frozen and unable to decide how to begin the work. In this latter section, the challenge is to consider an apostolic approach to church planting among the unreached peoples with a basic strategy.

Consider R. E. P. S.

A simple strategy is helpful for church planting teams. R. E. P. S. is a four-fold approach to guide disciple making activities. This approach must be contextualized in light of the people group and the strengths and limitations of the team members. R stands for Reach. Teams must think through the process of how they will connect, engage, and evangelize unreached peoples in the area. E represents Equip. After new believers come into the Kingdom, teams must be prepared to equip them (Eph 4:11-12) with teachings and spiritual disciplines needed for immediate growth in Christ as well as what they will need for long-term growth as a church.

P stands for partnership. Kingdom relationships begin after people come to faith. The Great Commission is not about getting converts and abandoning new churches to fend for themselves. Paul considered new churches as partners in the gospel (Phil 1:5). Teams must see these new disciples as partners in reaching their social networks as well as partners in crossing cultural gaps to other unreached people groups. Westerners are good at paternalism, but not partnership. Teams must make sure they know the difference and act appropriately.

Finally, S stands for Send. Building on partnership, teams must work with newly planted churches to develop and send other church planting teams. It should not be seen as an unusual matter for the original church planting team to travel with the new believers into other parts of the world to make disciples and plant churches. At times, Paul built his team with new believers from the newly planted churches.

Migration may cut the geographical ties in people’s lives, but it does not sever the social ties. These social networks allow for teams to travel internationally with the gospel. Once people move, they remain in regular contact with family members, friends, and acquaintances in their homelands.

An example of the continuation of the relationships is shown in the transfer of money. One of the benefits of migration is that migrants usually send money back to family, friends, and villages. In fact, “the remittances sent by migrants back to their countries of origin provide significant financial capital flows and a relatively stable source of income.”²⁰ In 2017, \$613 billion USD was sent by the global migrant population to other countries.²¹ The United States has been the largest sender of remittances for decades. In 2015, \$61 billion was sent to other countries. Saudi Arabia is the second-largest sender of remittances with \$39 billion USD, followed by Switzerland with \$24 billion USD.²² India, China, and the Philippines are the top three countries receiving remittances (Table 7).

Country	US Dollars Billions
India	69
China	64
Philippines	33
Mexico	31
Nigeria	22
Egypt	20
Pakistan	20
Vietnam	14
Bangladesh	13
Indonesia	9

Table 7. Top Countries Receiving Remittances, 2017²³

Teams must recognize if this much money is traveling across social networks, then those networks are likely well-established and trusted. Teams should understand the gospel can also travel across such global relationships. Developing partnerships and following newly planted churches across their social networks in

their homelands is an amazing way to reach across geographic and culture barriers as insiders with the good news of Jesus.²⁴

Conclusion

The Divine Maestro has been moving His image bearers since Genesis 1. His mission has always involved migration. The church would be wise to recognize what the Lord is doing along these lines in the world today and respond in an apostolic fashion to make disciples and plant churches where gospel foundations do not exist. Trans-national social networks are amazing bridges for the gospel to cross into unreached people groups residing in other countries. Gone are the days when mission activity is only “over there.” The church lives in a time when a key to reaching them “over there” is to reach them “over here.” And the converse is also true!

NOTES

1. Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, 4th ed. (New York: The Guilford Press, 2009).

2. Reuters, “India’s Rohingya Refugees Struggle with Hatred, Fear as First Group is Expelled,” October 6, 2018 and National Public Radio, “Stunning Photos Depict Migrants ‘As They’d Rather be Seen,’” October 7, 2018.

3. United Nations, *International Migration Report 2017*, 9 [on-line] http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/migrationreport/docs/MigrationReport2017_Highlights.pdf; accessed October 7, 2018.

4. *Ibid.*, 11.

5. *Ibid.*, 12.

6. *International Migration Report 2017*, 6.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*, 13.

9. Open Doors, 2016-2017 Fast Facts; [on-line] <https://www.ied.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors/Fact-Sheets-and-Infographics/Fast-Facts>; accessed October 5, 2018.

10. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Refugee or Migrant?” [on-line] <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/asylum-and-migration.html>; accessed October 7, 2018.

11. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Figures at a Glance,” [on-line] <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>; accessed October 7, 2018.

12. *International Migration Report 2017*, 7.

13. Two excellent books written to assist U.S. churches in understanding refugees are Matthew Soerens and Jenny Yang, *Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion, and Truth in the Immigration Debate*, revised edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2018) and Stephan Bauman, Matthew Soerens, and Issam Smeir, *Seeking Refugee: On the Shores of the Global Refugee Crisis* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2016).

14. J. D. Payne, *Strangers Next Door: Immigration, Migration, and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012).

15. Source: Global Research Department, International Mission Board, US and Canadian numbers from Bryan Galloway (PeopleGroups.info Initiative Lead, IMB Global Research) in email to author October 24, 2017. Galloway noted the numbers may be off by 1-5 people groups.

16. Ibid.

17. For more information on apostolic church planting, see my book *Apostolic Church Planting: Birthing New Churches from New Believers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015) and *Discovering Church Planting: An Introduction to the Whats, Whys, and Hows of Global Church Planting* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2012).

18. Charles Brock, *Indigenous Church Planting: A Practical Journey* (Neosho, MO: Church Growth International, 1994), 30.

19. Taken from J. D. Payne, *Apostolic Church Planting: Birthing New Churches from New Believers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2015), 51.

20. International Organization for Migration, *World Migration Report 2018*, 4; [on-line] https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2018_en.pdf; accessed October 7, 2018.

21. World Bank Group, *Migration and Remittances: Recent Developments and Outlook*, v,[on-line] <https://www.knomad.org/sites/default/files/2018-04/Migration%20and%20Development%20Brief%2029.pdf>; accessed October 10, 2018.

22. *World Migration Report 2018*, 31.

23. *Migration and Remittances*, 5.

24. I share examples of R.E.P.S. strategies in *Strangers Next Door* that have resulted in churches planted in Asian contexts as a result of disciple making and church planting activities in western countries.