

The “Other” Is My Neighbour

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Developing an Ecumenical Response to Migration



**World Council
of Churches
Publications**

THE “OTHER” IS MY NEIGHBOUR
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INTRODUCTION

Throughout 2011 and 2012, representatives from churches and church-related organizations as well as several migration networks met to consider the theme “Who is my neighbour? Migration and the ecclesial landscape – an ecumenical response to migration.” For this purpose, three consultations were held: in Beirut, Lebanon (5-7 December 2011), Geneva, Switzerland (7-9 May 2012) and Manila, the Philippines (4-11 November 2012).

The consultations were organized by the World Council of Churches (WCC) as a regional and global meeting of the Global Ecumenical Network on Migration (GEM). The GEM meeting is always carried out in partnership with one of the members of the network comprising the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), the Churches’ Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) and the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC), Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI), National Council of Churches in Australia (NACC) and the Ecumenical Initiative for Justice (KAIROS). These consultations aim at “assist[ing] the churches and the ecumenical organizations in their calling to be the church amidst the phenomenon of increasing diversity of people, language, cultures, ethnicity and religions.”¹

At each consultation, responses to migration issues from regional contexts from all over the world were explored. Each was followed by a second smaller gathering of the Theological Working Group, which dealt specifically with the theological and ecclesiological consequences of the findings of the various regions. Issues that provided structure and focus for our theological debate included:

the ways in which we view or understand ourselves and “others”; the moral imperative of holding powers accountable for the present economic policies that thrive on the abuse of human beings and the creation; and practical

¹ “Who is my neighbour?” *Migration and the ecclesial landscape: An ecumenical response to migration*, WCC concept paper, 2012, 1.

steps to encourage and equip congregations to become just and inclusive communities.²

This document is the result of the deliberations at all the meetings. It is written from the joint perspective of migrant churches and established historic congregations. This document is divided into three sections. The first section explores the biblical and theological insights related to migration. The second section identifies the subsequent ecclesiological implications of migration on the ecclesial landscape and for the nature and mission of the church itself. The third section calls for a renewed ecumenical response to migration in the light of the WCC 2013 Assembly theme, “God of life, lead us to justice and peace.” The volume concludes with an appendix that offers an assessment of the migration phenomenon and discusses its several facets and ambiguities.

As Christians, We Hold These Convictions

1. We affirm the sacredness of all human life and the sanctity of creation

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth ... And God saw that it was good ... So God created humankind in his image ...”

All people are made in the image of God. Respect for the human dignity and the worth of every person regardless of age, abilities, ethnicity, gender, class, nationality, race and religion is foundational to our faith. Our faith compels us to ensure that human life, physical security and personal safety are upheld in law and institutions.

² “Who is my neighbour?” *Migration and the ecclesial landscape: An ecumenical response to migration*, WCC concept paper, 2012, 2.

2. The biblical values of love, justice and peace compel us to renew Christian response to the marginalized and excluded.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’” (Matthew 22:37-39)

The realm of God is a vision of a just and united world. The challenge of prophesy and of Jesus’ teaching is to liberate and equip Christians to have the courage to work for alternative community, to work for peace and justice, which is to address the causes which uproot people... There is no peace without justice or full justice without peace. (Amos 5:24) Our faith compels us to struggle for justice and peace for all; to work for a world where economic, political and social institutions serve people rather than the other way around.

3. The biblical challenge to build inclusive community requires us to accompany the uprooted in service and witness.

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.” (Ephesians 2:19)

Christians are called to be with the oppressed, the marginalized and the excluded in their suffering, their struggles and their hopes. A ministry of accompaniment and advocacy with uprooted people upholds the principles of prophetic witness and service – *diaconia*. We cannot desert the “needy,” nor set boundaries to compassion. (Hebrews 13:2, Luke 10:25-37, Jeremiah 5-7)

Rationale

The Central Committee of the World Council of Churches on September 22, 1995 unanimously adopted a statement on uprooted people, “A Moment to Choose: Risking to Be with Uprooted People.” The issues they grappled with are as relevant today as they were at that time. Some excerpts from this statement are reproduced on the facing page.

Challenges and Opportunities

Migration poses a number of challenges and opportunities for Christian communities looking to God to lead them toward justice and peace today. How will migration change the relationship we have with our neighbours, and indeed, who do we see as our neighbours? How can churches overcome the tendency of “othering” the outsiders? What is the nature of the global and local communities that we as Christians want to bring into being? What are the principles that will guide us to justice, peace and the integrity of creation as we face the challenges of migration? How can the “other” be fully included? How might we understand and re-imagine the very nature and mission of the church in the light of the migration context we have outlined? What does the Christian tradition offer in terms of ethical guidelines and experiences with migration?

Sold for 300 Dollars

It has been quite a journey from being just an Overseas Filipino Worker [OFW] in Korea to what I am now: a firm advocate/activist for migrants' rights. It was in June, 1991 when I embarked on a new chapter of my life as an OFW in Korea.

I am the ninth of 13 children, thus it was difficult for my parents to send us all to school. I couldn't get a job that would pay decent wages so I planned to go abroad. I found a recruiter who found me a job in South Korea. When my passport was handed to me, the information regarding my age, address and date of birth had been changed. Since I had paid the recruiter a huge amount of money (Php 45,000 or \$2,400) which I had borrowed, I kept silent. I was 20 years old at that time.

We were ordered to proceed to Window 5 at the immigration line, where we were waved through without any questions straight to boarding the plane. It was the same thing when we arrived in South Korea: to go through a specific immigration booth, where we were just waved through and immediately whisked to our hotel. There was a selection process going on and for every man selected, an envelope of money was given to the recruiter as payment.

On the very first day of work, we were forced to work for 12-14 hours without any rest or sufficient food. I received a salary much smaller than what was promised. I had no overtime pay and we worked seven days a week with 14-hour shifts. I realized that I was an undocumented worker, and as such, could not complain as we were not legal. Because of this, I confronted my employer only to find out that he bought me from my recruiter for \$300.

At the embassy, I discovered that there were so many of us Filipino workers who were undocumented and were being exploited and maltreated. Some were even physically abused. The response of the embassy officials angered and horrified me: these officials called us “stupid” and a “shame” to our country.

I was able to become a migrants’ rights advocate when I became involved in my church. I started feeling like a human again and not a machine. It was also my work with the church where I saw the magnitude of the problem of migrants, particularly undocumented migrant workers, I saw how they were being hunted like animals, and some died while trying to escape immigration authorities.

After 12 years in South Korea, I was found out by immigration police and was deported.

1. BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL INSIGHTS

1. As Christian churches grapple with the steep questions posed by the contemporary migration context, they can turn first to the strong biblical themes concerning migration, the “other” and the church.

“Strangers” on the Move

2. The biblical writings, partly going back to times of exile and migration, are ambivalent about the migratory experience. The biblical stories and ethical guidelines reflect that leaving one’s country can be a road either to freedom (Exodus 14:19ff) or to slavery (Genesis 37:28). The Scriptures speak of both hardships and new chances, of injustice as well as restored life. They show the migration experience in its complexity and ambiguity: it can be a blessing or a curse, a right to enjoy or an injustice too harsh to endure. Therefore, the biblical witness does not categorically denounce or affirm migration. Rather, it provides narratives that inform our conversation on the biblical texts, indicating that all peoples created in the image of God deserve to be treated with dignity and as recipients of justice.
3. The book of Genesis highlights a range of archetypal human migratory experiences. Cain became a displaced person, and people migrated to the cities as the centres of power. Noah and his family were forced to leave the place of their origin due to a natural disaster. Abraham and Sarah, ancestors of the faith, are described as people who are “called out.” They left their home for a new unknown place that God claimed he would show them in time (Genesis 12:1), while Abraham and Lot realized that the land they lived on was insufficient to meet the needs of different extended families (Genesis 13:1-18). Neighbouring countries became a destination for survival in periods of crop failure and famine (e.g., Genesis 12:10; 26:1; 41:57).
4. Foundational stories of faith, such as the story about the Israelites who escaped slavery in Egypt, worshipped God in a portable sanctuary (Exodus 26) and travelled to the Promised Land, refer to experiences of migration (Exodus 12ff.). While the experience of

leaving Egypt and nomadic life in the desert marked the identity of the people of God, the Scriptures also recognize that people on the move need something more permanent. The people of Israel fostered hope to have land and to enjoy the fruits of their labour (Leviticus 25:38, Isaiah 65:22).

5. The Mosaic laws for life in the Promised Land were intended to create a safe place for all (Leviticus 25:18). The laws provided protection for widows and orphans, for those who lost their land and were therefore forced to migrate. Leviticus 25 introduces the Year of Jubilee, in which all properties should be returned to the original owners. Proprietors are admonished to keep in mind that God is the sole proprietor of land and that people are aliens and guests in God's country (Leviticus 25:23). The circle of poverty and forced migration and internal displacement was thereby to be broken, so that life could be affirmed.

Violent Expelling from the Land: Colombia

In Colombia, communities formed by indigenous, African descent and *campesino* (farmer) groups in the Uraba region were violently expelled from their ancestral territory by a transnational economic project for the production of agro-fuel.

Today, these communities are returning to their territory thanks to the intervention of Christian and human rights organizations that accompanied them in order to rebuild their lives and their indigenous culture. In this way, they are also recovering the biodiversity of their territories that was being destroyed by large palm oil plantations.

6. Turning to the New Testament, movement, travel and exile are shown to be central aspects of the life of Jesus. Jesus is often referred to as an outsider – for example, the one for whom there is no room in the inn (Luke 2:7), the refugee and immigrant in Egypt (Matthew 2:13), the man who has “nowhere to lay his head” (Luke 9:58). As the word incarnate, God in human flesh, Jesus can be described as a

divine migrant who crossed borders between heaven and earth. During his life, while travelling from town to town, he challenged the validity of ethnic and cultural barriers, as is visible in his encounters with Samaritans. Movement from one place to the other also characterized the life of Jesus' disciples. They were called to leave their homes (e.g., Matthew 4:19) and according to tradition, they travelled to distant lands to proclaim the gospel. In light of the Book of Acts, it is not perhaps surprising that the early Christians are referred to as those on/of the way (Acts 9:2) and that movement and concepts of exile also featured prominently in the emerging church. Christians are described by the author of 1 Peter as "aliens and exiles" (1 Peter 2:11). Alienation and migration thus are identity marks of God's chosen people (1 Peter 2:9).

7. Theologically speaking, migration as being dispersed (*diaspora*) and alienated is therefore a mark of the church (*nota ecclesiae*). This culminates in the Letter to the Hebrews, which underlines that believers are pilgrims who "have no lasting city but are looking for the city that is to come" (Hebrews 13:14). From this perspective, all human beings, residents with or without a migration background, are "foreigners." Our identities are constructed in an in-between: in-between paradise lost and the heavenly Jerusalem, in-between cross, resurrection and the second coming of Christ, in-between ethnic or gender identity and the larger body of Christ, in-between despair and hope. In the local Christian communities, pilgrims find temporary residence, a home for the homeless, where they experience comfort, share hope and struggle together while trusting in the promise of a new creation. Thus, a primary metaphor the Bible uses throughout describes the relationship of the people of God to the world they live in as resident aliens. This means that Christians throughout the centuries have lived in tension with the socio-political context, causing them not to remain inward-focused, but rather outwardly-seeking to faithfully live out the gospel.

The “Other” as the Image of God

8. That the Scriptures refer to followers of Jesus as “aliens and exiles” implies that migration in itself is not viewed as an experience to be aspired to. Much rather, it calls us to justly and inclusively relate to others who equally experience alienation. It thus provides an ethical mandate for the way we perceive and respond to the presence of the other. It invites us to faithfully align ourselves with the eschatological perspective of journeying with the nations (“others”) to the Messianic banquet in the heavenly Jerusalem (Isaiah 25:6). It is *with* the nations that we sojourn and will sit at the banquet table. It is also *with* the other that we hope for justice and deliverance from forces of death (Isaiah 25:8; 26:9). The other is included in the eschatological perspective and in the cry that God will raise the hand against the power of violent and unjust oppressors.
9. While disconcerting expressions of exclusion and racism can be found in biblical narratives, especially in the stories of the land conquest and the exilic period, many passages call upon the Israelite people to care for and support the “alien.” The alien should not just be tolerated but loved (Leviticus 19:34). Food and clothing should be provided, wages of the poor and needy should not be withheld (Deuteronomy 24:14). Religious leaders were summoned to uphold justice, especially in relation to those who were vulnerable – widows, foreigners, orphans (Jeremiah 7:6, cf. Exodus 23:9 and Deuteronomy 24:18). Psalm 146:9, written during the exilic period, exemplifies that God watches over the foreigners. The reference to a God who supports migrants in their plight and who sees to an end of their exploitation became the very core of the covenant relation (Exodus 3:7-8; 22:21).
10. The ethical mandate “love your neighbour as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 19:19) reflects that all were created in God’s image. Being the image of God is a relational issue, particularly so in the light of the Trinity. Human beings and the world are God’s (Genesis 1:26). We are related to God, but also to others. All of us mirror God’s being. In the context of migration, this notion of *imago Dei* affirms the unbreakable interrelatedness of God, human beings and the world. Theologically, it is generally used to emphasize the

essential equality, value and unbreakable relationship between human beings, other human beings and God. On the other hand, it points to the richness, the unity and the diversity of God's creation and, consequently, the respect required for it. The notion of being in the image of God thus empowers us to relate respectfully and in an embracing manner to all sojourners, to all people who migrate. Christianity's claim that all were equal before God and all equally precious to him impacted the formation of the early church and Greco-Roman society. Christian communities became a harbour to women, who had always been kept in the shadows, and to slaves, who had never before been recognized as having social dignity or political importance.

11. The "Golden Rule" – "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31) – implies that we need to uphold each and every person's dignity. Furthermore, the divine command "Love your neighbour as yourself" reminds us of the fact that the inclusive kingdom of God knows no human-made barriers, no foreigners and no "others." It provides a place for people who are "neighbours" to one another, equally part of the kingdom-community, equally gifted with talents.

The "Other" and the Community

12. As Christians, we affirm that the church, the communion of believers, is one through the redemptive work of Christ (Galatians 3:28). Therefore, those who are baptized are joined together as brothers and sisters. We acknowledge that no part of the body can be rejected and no part can claim to be the most important. As the apostle Paul wrote to the multi-ethnic congregation in the city of Corinth: "For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." (1 Corinthians 12:13). The one constant and unchangeable reality for the church is the oneness of the body of Christ of whom all followers of Christ are members.

13. While we affirm this unity of the church, we also recognize its great diversity. Though the church is grounded in the one word of God, it has become manifest in diverse ways.¹ It is indeed fair to say that cultural and theological diversity has been a characteristic of Christ's church from its very inception. Thus, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28) does not mean that the church rejects or denies distinct religious or ethnic identities as members of the wider society. Rather, it embodies them within the vision of a new creation in which diversity is celebrated and unity experienced, while mutuality and interdependence of life is affirmed. In other words, the church is the promise of a new eschatological community, sojourning with the nations to the heavenly Jerusalem for the Messianic banquet (Isaiah 2:2; 25:6). It lives by Paul's word, "For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (Ephesians 2: 14).
14. Cultural differences may be experienced as a threat to one's own values. Indeed, the presence of the "other" questions our way of living and our worldview. Yet we may remember that the "other" also defines us. It is in relation to the other that we clarify our identity and value as well as evaluate our convictions. Christians, as pilgrims on the way to the Messianic banquet, view identity and otherness in the light of the kingdom that is to come. Our identity is determined by our communion with Christ and being part of the kingdom-community. This identity embraces diversity as much as it celebrates unity.²
15. Unity and diversity are not only visible in the church, but they can also be found in God, in God's trinitarian way of being and interacting. The Father is different from the Son, as much as the Son is different from the Father and the Spirit, and yet they are united in a life-enhancing difference and in loving relationship. As a pilgrim community, we "believe in the Triune God who is the creator,

¹ *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper 198, WCC, Geneva, 2005, 4.

² "The dialogue between faith and culture," talk given by John Paul II at Sogang University, Seoul, South Korea, May 5, 1985. *Text in Origins* Vol. 14, No. 2, 21.

redeemer and sustainer of life. God created the whole *oikoumene* in his image and constantly works in the world to affirm and safeguard life. We believe in Jesus Christ, the life of the world, the incarnation of God's love for the world (John 3:16). Affirming life in all its fullness is Jesus Christ's ultimate concern and mission (John 10:10). We believe in God, the Holy Spirit, the life-giver, who sustains and empowers life and renews the whole creation (Genesis 2:7; John 3:8)."³

The "Other" and God-Given Resources

16. While we hold that God empowers life and renews creation, we acknowledge that the earth pays the price of the sinfulness of people (Romans 8:22, Isaiah 24:4-13). Instead of the renewal of creation, the earth that was entrusted to us is often misused and human beings are exploited. We need to recognize that the God-given resources of the earth are to be used for the benefit of all. God's gift is not exclusively meant for a privileged minority; the earth is God's creation and treasured "possession." All that exists was created by God and it was good (Genesis 1:31, Psalm 24:1). God blessed human beings to enjoy the earth and to care for her (Genesis 1:28). This calls us to acknowledge that we live in interdependence with creation. Stewardship of the earth and concrete steps toward eco-justice are nothing less than the recognition that creation is God's and the resources are for all to be enjoyed.

The "Other" as a Member

17. The "other" is not just tolerated in the kingdom of God, but has an active role to play and a unique contribution to make. In the prophetic writings, we find that the nations are drawn to Zion by God's light and bring their wealth as a tribute to God's reign (Isaiah 60: 5-11). Foreigners will rebuild the city walls; their kings will serve the new kingdom (Isaiah 60:10). In the description of the future of Zion, the tribute by the nations is mentioned in parallel with peace

³ *Together towards life: Mission and Evangelism in changing landscapes*, WCC Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, 2012, par. 1.

that flows to the city (Isaiah 66:10). All nations and all tongues will come to see God's glory (Isaiah 66:18), not just the children of Abraham.

18. The gospels remind us as well that the "other" contributes. In Luke's account of the people who were cured of leprosy, it was the excluded Samaritan who came back to bring tribute to Jesus and who was saved by his faith (Luke 17:16-19). The Syro-Phoenician woman challenged Jesus to reckon with the Gentiles and include them in his ministry (John 4). The Roman soldier, a foreigner who understood that Jesus did not have to travel in order to heal his slave, contributed greatly by becoming an exemplary believer who was almost "obviously" included in the Kingdom of Heaven and the eschatological meal (Matthew 8:8-11). Recognizing the contributions of the "other" to the life of the community creates space for inclusion and mutuality.

The United Church of Christ in the Philippines: A Pilgrim Community

The United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) is a pilgrim community. The UCCP in its statement of faith declares that: We believe... In the church, the one body of Christ the community of those reconciled to God through Jesus Christ and entrusted with Jesus' own ministry.

We believe... Man is created in the image of God, sinful and destined to live in the community with God, entrusted with God's creation and called to participate in the establishment of a meaningful and just social order. Our statement of faith has guided us in our giving worth, honour and respect to persons and people as they are created in the image of God, whoever they are and wherever they come from.

It is on this premise that the UCCP opens its door through the programme of caring and ministering to the Indonesian individuals and families who have come to our land. They were Christian Indonesian farmers and fishermen who have come to our shore in the Balot and Sarangani islands. They were landless in their own country, searching for greener pastures. In the late 70's, they were just few, but as the years went on, they increased in numbers and local churches have been organized in their committees so that in 1986, they were recognized as legitimate participants and members of the UCCP and integrated with the South Cotabato-Sarangani District Conference.

These Indonesian churches continue to grow. Last April during the Annual Conference in session of South Cotabato-Sarangani District Conference, 23 Indonesian local churches participated. With our faith journey as a church, we work together irrespective of colour, age, gender, profession and nationality. We appreciate everyone's contribution in their participation in building the Kingdom of God where love, justice and peace prevail.