

“I Have People”: Transnational Families and Ministry

by T. Wayne Dye and Danielle Zachariah

A hundred and fifty years ago, when streams of Irish immigrants crossed an ocean to move to the United States, families remaining in Ireland would hold a funeral for the prospective migrant. Although the migrant might live for many years—decades even—in the United States, for all practical purposes, he or she was dead to the family. Letters were slow, sea voyages expensive and long, resulting in the death of close family ties, leaving the migrant untethered to relational bonds in the “Old Country.” The old life—complete with cultural norms and close family relationships—became little more than a cherished memory.

The presence of technology has changed this pattern dramatically. With very little effort, we can share pictures via Instagram, text via WhatsApp, and talk face-to-face via Skype—and that only names a few of the many resources available for transoceanic communication. Furthermore, airplanes have decreased the time and cost of travel so that someone can visit almost anywhere by spending a day or two, and a couple thousand dollars or less, on the trip. Compared with the months required for sea travel, airplanes have significantly increased the ease and possibility of visiting family living half-way around the world.

These technological changes have given rise to an increase in what those who study migration call “transnational families.” According to Fesenmyer (2014),

“Transnational” families are families who live apart but who create and retain a “sense of collective welfare and unity, in short ‘familyhood,’ even across national borders” (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002) . . . They mark the intersection, on the one hand, of individual and familial aspirations and needs, and on the other hand, structural opportunities and constraints.

Although much of the research has focused almost exclusively on the separation of what Americans call the “nuclear family,” transnational families often also include grandparents, adult siblings, aunts and uncles, and cousins. Since different cultural communities draw the distinctive lines of “family” and “not family” differently, our discussion of transnational families in this article will

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reflect a more fluid understanding of family by broadly using the term to refer to whomever the migrant, and migrant's community, considers tied to them by family bonds.

These bonds create a kind of haven, an emotional and financial safety net, that protects against the world. In collectivistic cultures, families operate on the principle of the Musketeers: "one for all, and all for one." The honor of one member is the honor of all, the success of one is the success of all, the shame of one is the shame of all. In societies where honor has the power to contract good marriages, obtain well-paying jobs, and influence others in the society, adding to, or at the very least, preserving the family's honor is one of the primary ways in which individuals show loyalty to the family network. Since the family forms its members' moral compasses from a young age, loyalty to the family is often the cornerstone of all morality.

Transnational Families: Then and Now

Although the current form is a result of the technological changes of the past decade, transnational families are hardly new. Whether to escape war or poverty, or simply to seek a better life, families, and individuals within families, often migrate for the betterment of the whole group. With families being the "main pillar of social responsibility," members are expected to contribute to the emotional and financial well-being of the group (Nedelcu and Wyss 2016, 213). Especially in difficult circumstances, one's individual well-being must sometimes be sacrificed for the sake of the group.

In a study done on the emotional toll of transnational mothering on Filipina women and their children, Parreñas (2001, 361) found that

the pain of family separation creates various feelings, including helplessness, regret, and guilt for mothers and loneliness, vulnerability, and insecurity for children.

Mothers especially felt guilty since they felt unable to perform their role as nurturer due to globalization's demand for female workers to perform "low-wage service labor in more developed nations" (Parreñas 2001, 368). Unable to fulfill their obligation of emotional labor "with daily acts of caregiving," mothers often overcompensated by providing their children with monetary compensation in the form of various gifts, and a "secure middle-class lifestyle" in the Philippines (Parreñas 2001, 372, 370). Although both mothers and children would have preferred to remain together in the Philippines, the burden of financial provision required mothers to continue their overseas work. Without that steady income, parents would have



been unable to "ensure that their children eat daily meals of meat and rice, attend college, and have secure housing" (Parreñas 2001, 373).

To shorten the distance, these mothers would often write letters and call their children "at least once every two weeks" (Parreñas 2001, 374). They would also visit their homes in the Philippines every few years, if possible. As many of these women migrated before the advent of the smartphone—or even the internet—family intimacy suffered. There was a common feeling that intimacy could "only be fully achieved with great investment in time and daily interactions in the family" (Parreñas 2001, 375). Without that

capability, and in spite of all efforts to the contrary, emotional bonds between mothers and children weakened, leading to feelings of "insurmountable loss" (Parreñas 2001, 372).

Creation of Ordinary Co-Presence

However, current technology provides easier ways for transnational families to maintain, and strengthen, those longed-for intimate social bonds, in addition to providing easier avenues for fulfilling familial obligations. Through some combination of instant messaging, video conferencing, inexpensive phone calls, and social networking sites (SNS), transnational families create what Nedelcu and Wyss call "ordinary co-presence." Ordinary co-presence focuses on the mundane areas and tasks of life to build and maintain familial bonds while strengthening intergenerational relations and reinforcing cultural and family norms. Nedelcu and Wyss provide an excellent example of ordinary co-presence through the account of a middle-aged Romanian dentist who had migrated to Switzerland:

I am always online: while I am cooking, the webcam is turned on so I can talk with and look at [my family] at odd moments.... With my mother, I can speak and do other things at the same time; I plug in the loudspeaker and I can iron, do the cleaning and talk to her.... I do not feel it is a waste of time. It is part of my daily routine; it is as if I were there. She tells me what she has done during the day...and it is something very positive for both of us. I feel better. If I had emigrated before the internet age, something important would be missing.... I do not feel that I have left Romania. I feel very close to them, as I live both here and there, in [my family] unity. (Nedelcu and Wyss 2016, 202–203)

The kind of co-presence described above is termed by the researchers "omnipresent" co-presence. This type, through use of video conferencing technologies, creates a

communication environment that enables the feeling of "being together"

as in (almost) face-to-face interaction and proximity. (Nedelcu and Wyss 2016, 210)

Comprehensive in scope, omnipresent, ordinary co-presence encourages both spontaneous and planned conversations on topics ranging from daily lives to recipes to politics. Technology becomes a tool for the creation of new “being together” norms based very closely on old patterns of interacting and sharing daily life.

For other migrants, though, these constant—often spontaneous—communications feel burdensome. However, the drive to maintain family ties remains strong, which gives rise to what Nedelcu and Wyss term “ritual” co-presence. In contrast with omnipresent co-presence, ritual co-presence is planned and focuses more on the fact of the communication rather than the content of the communication. As Nedelcu and Wyss (2016, 209) state,

Keeping up ties does not require an exchange of significant content; but the fact of communicating is significant per se and has a crucial emotional and relational importance.... This kind of communication constitutes the basis of a subjective feeling of co-presence and solidarity, even if the strength of family ties relies on neither the intensity of the exchanges nor the significance of their content.

In either case, though, the use of modern technology to create ordinary co-presence also creates “a sense of continuity and ongoing belonging, which seems to erase geographical and emotional boundaries” (Nedelcu and Wyss 2016, 212).

Some families even go beyond this ordinary co-presence. Baldassar et al. identifies something called “ambient co-presence,” which is a product of smartphones and other wireless connections. Much like ambient noise is constantly in the background, coloring a person’s interactions in a particular space—regardless of how often the noise consciously registers, ambient co-presence colors

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transnational families’ interactions with the world by creating an

ongoing awareness of distant others, both in families and in communities, that is produced in spite of irregular or absent face-to-face contact. (Baldassar et al. 2016, 138)

This product of an “always on’ culture” enhances a sense of belonging; conversely, it can also lead to increased inter-family conflict (Baldassar et al. 2016, 138). Thus, it is important to note that

it is the existing quality of the relationship that shapes the impact of ICTs [technology] on family relations, rather than the opposite. (Baldassar et al. 2016, 139)

Modern technology does not fix family conflicts; it merely provides an easier method for families to “retain a sense of familyhood without relying on physical proximity” through the sharing of mundane, everyday life (Baldassar et al. 2016, 139). In this way, migrants have the flexibility now to straddle two or more cultures, with strong ties to both their home *and* host cultures.

Long-Distance Care

Not only does modern technology provide an avenue for the easier maintenance of family unity, it also provides an avenue for fulfilling familial obligations that contribute to the honor and emotional and financial well-being of the family as a whole. Whether due to a deep love for family left behind or a feeling of social obligation, migrants send enough money home to “form the largest foreign aid force in the United States” (Olsen 2017, 42).

The money that immigrants send abroad—called remittances—dwarfs all other international spending by the government, humanitarian groups,

and missions organizations. In 2014, US migrants sent more than \$108 billion to developing countries, with Mexico topping the list. In contrast, private charities spent around \$44 billion in poor countries, and the government \$33 billion. (Oleson 2017, 42)

Although economic remittance has always been a facet of transnational families’ relationships, the amount of remittance has increased due to technology. In 2003, \$59 billion was sent to families in countries of origin; in 2017, \$600 billion was sent. Technology’s easy transfer of funds led to a 1000% increase in dollars sent home with only a 40% increase in migrants. And this number merely tracks remittances sent to and from banks; it fails to take into account the transfer of money via traveling relatives, cell phones, etc.

For some migrants, economic remittance is the reason they moved abroad. As with the Filipina mothers, their entire motivation for moving to a new country is to provide for their families in their home country. For others, technology’s easy handling of remittance is a relief for worried family members abroad. In interviews with Romanian migrants to Switzerland, Nedelcu and Wyss (2016, 212) found that sending economic remittances provided

the migrant, as well as his or her parents, some sense of security and the satisfaction of having fulfilled one’s family obligations.

As parents aged and began to experience “poor health, loss of autonomy, widowhood, social isolation and limited access to care,” migrants were able to adapt “their co-presence practices to their parents’ needs by intensifying contacts and strengthening co-presence at a distance” in addition to providing practical means of care

through hiring caretakers from a distance (Nedelcu and Wyss 2016, 211). This provided great relief of mind and heart to family members on both sides of the transnational divide.

However, even when economic remittance is viewed by migrants as a "strain on their livelihoods in host settings and as cause of a major setback to the realization of their initial migration," these same migrants still remit, even in spite of "economic hardships in the host society" (Kankonde 2010, 225). For some, remittances are a familial and societal obligation required of those who chose the role of the "family member going abroad." For others, sending remittances home is a way of increasing the family's status in an honor-shame society. As the apostle Paul points out in 1 Timothy 5:8,

But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

It would be unthinkable to bring shame on the family, and therefore on oneself, by not providing for family in the home country.

Implications for Ministry

When viewing any new phenomenon, there is a tendency to paint it as either a terrible and dangerous evil or, to use an Americanism, "the best thing since sliced bread." As with most phenomena, though, modern technology's impact on transnational families is neither. On the one hand, such close bonds provide comfort and support for those separated from ones whom they hold dear. On the other hand, the very network that provides migrants with a sense of belonging and a financial and relational safety net can create significant barriers to an individual's decision to follow Jesus. In the moral universe of the family, loyalty to the family is of paramount importance, and new religion seems to threaten old bonds.

It is with this perspective in mind that our own view needs to shift. Contrary to the past where migration weakened

family bonds, migration today sometimes binds families together more strongly. Technology provides the media for connection, and distance increases the motivation to not "take their connection for granted" (Meneses 2012, 69). The increased push towards globalization weakens the correlation of identity and culture with place while simultaneously strengthening the desire to hold onto tradition and ethnic ties (Wan 2007; Al Mayassa 2010; Meneses 2012). And more so than ethnic ties—which derive their power from "metaphorically creating a family writ large"—the blood ties of immediate and extended family often strengthen as well (Meneses 2012, 64). Just as ethnic ties fight back against the



weakening force of globalization, so too families on both sides of the transnational divide fight back against the weakening force of distance by consciously creating patterns of behavior that reinforce family connections. As Nedelcu and Wyss state (2016, 204),

Moreover, in this case a sort of "transnational moral economy of kin," which involves "putting family first" (Levitt and Jaworsky 2007, 137), works as a driver of family interactions and solidarities.

No longer are migrants untethered and seeking a place to transplant themselves, thus making them open to new cultures and ideas. Migrants now remain strongly bound to family,

and thus, loyalty to the family and the honor of the group factor strongly into their decision-making paradigms.

Ministry with the Diaspora

While it is more difficult for migrants to become followers of Jesus than in the past, a much more positive factor can be observed in the work of local diaspora Christians. Many are involved in ministry organized "around family ties and social networks to spread the gospel and serve the poor back in their countries of origin" (Olsen 2017, 41). Some examples include discipling new leaders via Skype and wiring funds through family networks to provide help for famine-stricken communities.

This is a powerful ministry force simply because so many new immigrants are already Christians. While the oft-spoken line "the nations are coming to us" holds true—including many from countries that are inaccessible to outsiders—many of these migrants are Christian already. According to Krabill and Norton (2015, 447), "Christians comprise nearly half . . . of the world's 214 million international migrants." Within the United States, the number is higher, with three-fourths of migrants self-identifying as Christian (Krabill and Norton 2015, 448).

Consequently, for those who feel called to work with diaspora peoples, they should shift their paradigm from ministry *to* the diaspora to ministry *with* the diaspora. Migrant Christians are already working on the ground, reaching out to neighbors and friends and building transnational churches through ongoing familial and societal ties. Partnering with migrant Christians is becoming a vital component of modern diaspora missions.

Respectful Dialogue

Respectful dialogue is the cornerstone of any partnership. Thus, before beginning ministry in non-Christian diaspora communities or even before planning mission trips overseas, dialogue with members of the target

community is vital. Talk with those who know the culture and community. Encourage them to be candid, listen appropriately, and ask questions to elicit more information. They will know best the needs of their particular communities; don't decide to build houses if their community really needs wells. Or perhaps training for nurses, pastors, or videographers is going to be more useful. Ask what the community needs and wants, and then work with them to provide those services. In addition, migrants may also know which leaders need to be contacted—and how to contact those leaders—in order to facilitate the success of a project. Perhaps even better, let them lead the project whenever possible.

While it is ideal to partner first with Christian migrants who are already working with their communities, sometimes there are no Christians with whom to partner. In those cases, seek out non-believing migrants from that culture. For example, Jim, a man from the Midwest United States, felt God's call to help refugees in his area by developing an adult literacy program. Through that program, he met and befriended the Muslim leader of a minority group in East Africa. Several years later, when the 2011 famine hit, the leader shared this heartbreaking news with Jim. By God's help, local Muslim refugees, Christian volunteers, and Feed My Starving Children partnered together to send five million meals of emergency food to those most vulnerable. The Muslim leader posted a large sign on the shipments of food with a warning to would-be pirates and bandits which said, "If you fear God and the Judgment Day, don't touch this food!" By God's grace, the shipment reached its intended destination.¹

In addition, if planning to engage in missions overseas, request additional help with language and culture learning. Learn how to act respectfully in that culture *before* traveling or moving.

This began as a simple friendship. However, it's led to a spiderweb of connections linking people across languages, cultures, and countries.

For example, Mia, a young woman interested in working with a minority people group in West Asia, sought to begin language learning while she continued her stateside preparation to move overseas. This desire led to her meeting and later developing a close friendship with a migrant woman from that people group. Currently, they spend time together, learn each other's languages, and assist each other in practical ways. The friendship has led to other relationships both in the United States and overseas, including one with an older migrant woman who needed someone to drive her to doctors' appointments. In addition, it happens that Mia's friend has family in a city near where she (Mia) plans to move and has introduced her to family members as a friend. When Mia moves, she will already have a new friend network in place. It is important to note that this friendship began simply as that—a friendship. However, it has led to a spiderweb of connections linking people across languages, cultures, and countries.²

Pre-existing Ties

Just as migrants know best what is needed in their communities overseas, they also have existing networks of people in both the host and home countries with whom one can partner. For example, one church, although they originally wanted to build a child sponsorship center, realized that it would be better to

run their development program though the growing network of lay women who already know their communities and will be empowered to help. (Olsen 2017, 47)

This decentralized and informal method of helping the children in the community was "designed to escape the gangs' notice" and required very

little travel to and from the country (Olsen 2017, 47). By working through pre-existing transnational ties, the church was able to develop a grassroots, ground-up approach that would have a higher likelihood of success.

Daily Life and Practical Love

Given the importance of sharing daily life as a means of strengthening family bonds, we would therefore expect a similar requirement for strengthening other relationships. After all, good partnerships are built on trust, and trust takes time and opportunities to experience, know, and test the character of the other person. As Christians, neither our partnerships nor our friendships are business deals; rather, they are human bonds, formed through love and respect, and manifested in practical care that melds both word and deed.

With ethnic groups where there are no believers, this practical outworking of the good news in our lives is even more important. Ministry to these diaspora communities must be a way of life rather than a strategy (Krabill and Norton 2015, 449). As for the church itself, Pouono (2017, 5) lists some ways to contribute:

For the church, a God-centered mission can be fully realized by tending to the marginalized of the community, offering greater support systems to those who need jobs and education, tending to the sick (mental and physical), up-skilling our leaders including ministers, providing financial advice to families, sharing resources and time, being aware of those who are considered "at risk," especially taking care of wholesome family relationships.

Preserve Family Ties

Whatever the form of ministry, Christian workers in both country of origin

and country of resettlement need to recognize the importance of family ties to all migrants, whether or not they are believers. For many people worldwide, family is the sun around which the events of life revolve. It is a stable group of people whose blood ties and daily living have built trust, friendship, and emotional support. On a more practical level, family helps its members find spouses, provides access to jobs and business contacts, and unfurls a financial safety net when in trouble. In exchange, family obligations require loyalty to the group, upright behavior that will bring honor, and shared financial support. As Gnaniah (2011, 163–164) writes,

A society has social rules, and India has rules, and those rules help. This was hard for even the great heroes of Christian mission like Carey and Ziegenbalg, whose individualistic orientation made it hard to comprehend our family orientation. Indeed, we cannot get married unless certain uncles and grandparents agree. They want to check all the family backgrounds of candidates for marriage. They weigh the strengths and weaknesses of the two young people and their families. This arranging is family-oriented and appropriate for a culture like ours. The missionary might come and say that I go to heaven alone, but I have to live here and now. *I need my family.* (emphasis added)

This need for family can hinder people from following Jesus—more so than ethnicity or even religion. For many people, it would be easier to cut off a limb than to leave the family network. Consider, for example, the differences between China and India. In China, persecution is national, and although brutal, is hardly stemming the tide of conversions; in India, persecution is familial, and that is harder to endure. In addition, in a community where conscience demands loyalty to the family network, it can feel morally wrong to follow Jesus. For example, one South Korean woman known to the authors of this article, was interested in

following Jesus, but was held back by her loyalty to her Buddhist mother.

It is true that ultimately each person must choose Jesus even over family. Jesus made this clear when he said,

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. (Matt. 10:37–38)

Nevertheless, the solution is not, as some have preached, the inevitable death of those family ties. Gnaniah (2011, 162) states that past missionaries to India hoped to solve the problem of caste by insulating converts



on mission compounds; instead, they unknowingly created a sixth caste that was lower than all the rest. In contrast, Gnaniah (2011, 162) shares how his father—after receiving a Bible and becoming a follower of Jesus—maintained his family network, continuing to identify with them, and as a result, “more among my caste came to know Jesus Christ.”

So how do we help new believers preserve family ties? One way is to gain approval first from the appropriate gatekeepers before asking family members to make a clear commitment to become followers of Jesus. Ask God to grant favor with a trusted leader and then approach him or her first

with the good news. This leader could be an elder in the extended family, a local mullah, or a respected national scholar. Take the time to build mutual trust and respect with the gatekeepers of the community; once their approval is won, potential listeners will no longer endure a crisis of conscience, if interested. And as family members listen, encourage them to discuss this information with each other. Give them time to think through their decisions and count the cost of their choices. Then, if they decide to follow Jesus, use culturally appropriate ways to ease the transition as much as possible. For example, for Thai believers, Mejudhon (2005, 13) advises the use of a traditional reconciliation ritual adapted to create “deeper bonding between the new converts and their social networks.” This process has three stages: “(1) confession and forgiveness, (2) the period of the probation, and (3) the baptismal service” (Mejudhon 2005, 13). Although the process may take weeks or months, Mejudhon (2005, 15–16) argues its benefit,

When the new converts take the initiative to value the interdependent orientation in Thai culture by asking for forgiveness, they show respect for Thai culture and their parents’ pain. As a result, the parents respect their decision to convert... This Christian ritual of reconciliation, Kama and Ahsikarma, fits the Thai’s concept of time and hierarchy, allowing Christians to be viewed as humble, meek, gentle and vulnerable, each of which is a religious model for Jesus’ disciples. This is an effective way to win Thai hearts. As an ancient Thai poem says: “Be soft as a silk thread and tie a tiger down.” (anonymous)

Another way to preserve ties is to be strategic in our method of delivery. In some communities, the same truth that would outrage in prose would be listened to in poetry. For others, song-dance genres are common means of communicating information. For example, Mlama (1994) writes about the repeated struggles of the

Tanzanian government to encourage community development initiatives in certain minority communities. When the community members were asked to develop effective methods of communicating information, five groups chose to use different song-dance genres (Mlama 1994).

With a diaspora community in Dallas, Texas, Elinor Beach partnered with a Vietnamese pastor to experiment with using stories as a way to share biblical truths. The pastor found this methodology to be successful both with his diaspora congregation and with his colleagues in rural Vietnam.³ Although it is easy for us to default to communication genres most natural to us, it is far better to research with an insider the way truth is commonly communicated and work with him or her to then craft the communication of biblical truth in culturally appropriate ways.

Similarly, consider what aspect of biblical truth to communicate when. For Muslim communities, for example, it might be best to build a foundation of trust through shared stories of the prophets. In Buddhist communities, beginning by talking through Ecclesiastes might strike a chord. Work to build bridges that will bear the weight of harder truths.

Conclusion: Partnering with Family Ties

As Christians, we have been given the great privilege and responsibility of sharing the good news of Jesus with those who do not yet know Him. As migration increases and technology improves, more and more people live within two cultural worlds, creating “natural pathways for the gospel” through transnational family ties (Looney 2017, 24). In advocating the utilization of these support networks, we are not suggesting anything new; migrant Christians have been doing the same for as long as they have been able. Rather, we are encouraging a partnership with this already ongoing work. **IJFM**

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Endnotes

- ¹ Anonymous. Personal communication. Name changed to protect privacy.
- ² Anonymous. Personal communication. Name changed to protect privacy.
- ³ Beach. Personal communication.

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