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# From the Margins to the Centre

## The Diaspora Effect

A Collection of Essays to Celebrate  
the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Tyndale Intercultural Ministry  
Centre

*Edited by Michael Krause  
with  
Narry Santos and Robert Cousins*

From the Margins to the Centre: The Diaspora Effect

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## CHAPTER 3

# Biblical Models for Emerging Diaspora Leaders

*Lisa Pak*

In this new season for the Canadian Bible Society, the diaspora church and our younger generation have become our priority demographics for engagement. Several weeks ago, a ministry partner made this comment, “Lisa, I feel like, because we didn’t go to the nations, God is bringing them all here.” The context was an observation about the massive influx of international students converging in Toronto and the GTA. This is Johnson Hsu’s ministry as the City Director for Toronto at International Student Ministries Canada. Undeniably, young diaspora generations are coming to Canada in droves.

The faces we see in Canadian society, the languages we hear, and the food we eat, particularly in the urban centres, are rapidly changing and increasing in diversity. Global migration changes - which include: displaced migrants because of conflict and war, refugees seeking asylum, international students, migrant workers—are visibly changing the way our cities look. This is good change. It is a beautiful mosaic. It is a divinely orchestrated opportunity for the *missio Dei*.

The demographics describing the growing numbers of foreign-born residents are readily available from Statistics Canada, but for anyone living in cities like Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal, or Edmonton, the changes are obvious, undeniable and, in many ways, present new opportunities. Canada is truly becoming a multi-ethnic society with all the dynamic cultural exchange that comes when the languages, foods, music, fashion, traditions and customs of the world converge. We also observe cultural clashes that expose personal prejudices towards certain people groups and our preferential biases for others. Paradigms of family and kinship ties, community and privacy, honour and shame, religion and spirituality have to be understood in this multi-faceted, multi-cultural, freedom-of-religion and freedom-of-speech context. As

immigrants, our newest Canadians also face challenges with their own children and the younger generation who are being brought up in a context vastly different from their own. They are being formed in thought and character by this diversity of cultures, shaped by a Western education system, where English and French are the official languages, but where, in the majority of immigrant households, a different language is spoken at home.

What does this mean for the Church in Canada and how does this affect the emerging diaspora generations? Is there a key role for the more traditional, established churches in equipping and empowering the emerging diaspora churches and their young leaders? This chapter will examine three biblical diaspora examples presented with their historical context, unique life challenges, personal emotional baggage, struggles with identity, and in their own journey with God where he used them as pivotal agents in his redemptive plan for humankind. The hope is that these cases will challenge us to see that this current diaspora generation also has the same potential for impact, not in spite of, but rather because of their struggles and ultimately because of God's sovereignty and faithfulness.

### **Joseph: Starting Over in a Foreign Land**

When we are introduced to Joseph in Genesis 37, he is 17 years old, the second youngest and favourite son of the aging patriarch Jacob. In fact, because he was so favoured, more than a little spoiled, and certainly entitled, he was oblivious to how much resentment, bitterness and hatred he had incited in his brothers. The dreams God gave him and how he chose to share them do not do much to curry favour with anyone, including his parents.

We know the story from Genesis, chapter 37. He narrowly avoided his own brothers' conspiracy to murder him through Reuben's intervention (his eldest brother), only to be human-trafficked at Judah's suggestion (4th eldest brother) – sold into slavery to a passing caravan of Ishmaelite traders on their way to the great nation of Egypt. His comfortable life, as he knew it, was decidedly over. In spite of the circumstances, God's plan was unfolding in the life of this young man.

Joseph found himself separated from his family, immersed in the culture of a powerful, prosperous, foreign empire and surrounded by the sounds of an exotic language. He was no longer favoured and

babied; he was a slave. He literally started life there below the bottom of the social ladder. Years later, after learning the language, working hard, and demonstrating his management and business acumen, he earned Potiphar's trust. But, just when things seem to be on the upturn, he was wrongfully accused of attempted rape by his master's wife. Potiphar was furious and had him locked up in the dungeons of Egypt; of course he would believe his beautiful wife over this foreign slave. There was no trial. There were no lawyers. There was neither due process nor a constitutional penal code. He was thrown into prison, with all the other sorry lot, for as long as those in power decreed. For most, being in prison was a death sentence, and Joseph had no reason to expect any different - except for those dreams God had given him and his faith in the God of his fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Then came a glimmer of hope; this might be God's time! The Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker both found themselves in prison after having offended him. They both had dreams and interpreting them was Joseph's particular skill, perhaps even his spiritual gift, in addition to resourcefulness and management abilities he had already displayed. Even after interpreting the dreams, and in spite of his plea to the cupbearer to remember him, he still waited two long years in the prison, doing the same thing, every day, for 730 more days. Waiting is always part of God's education. His diaspora people, Jewish and otherwise, must wait for him to move. Then, as the world's climate bent to God's plan, God sent Pharaoh two incomprehensible dreams. The cupbearer was reminded of his promise and Joseph was called to Pharaoh's court to interpret the dreams. Joseph saw that the dreams were warning Pharaoh of the upcoming seven years of plenty that would precede seven years of harsh famine. During those earlier years of suffering, disappointment, and waiting, Joseph had been primed by God himself, through all the struggles and trials, to be fully ready for the remarkable responsibilities of guiding the entire North African and Middle Eastern region through the next fourteen years. He was the right man for the job. He was God's chosen person for the job. He was a young diaspora leader.

One can only imagine how a young man in his late teens was able to dig deep into his character to find a way to not only survive but truly thrive as a slave in Potiphar's house. He had never had to work a day in his previous life—he was the one who brought food and messages from

Jacob to his other brothers who were busy tending to the flocks. But in Egypt, he was forced to work. He was not even considered human, but rather the property of his master and owner. It's in those moments that we are able to see exactly what this young man was truly made of.

We don't know what his personal thoughts were, or anything about his emotional journey when he realized he would never return home. We don't know how he processed his anger, or the betrayal of his own brothers; although we saw some of his residual emotions later on when they came to bow before him. We don't know how he squared away the fact that his father did not come looking for the remains of his favourite son. Remember, Joseph was completely unaware of the lies that his brothers told their father Jacob to cover up their gross offense. But he was now in Egypt, a foreign land, not of his own choice, working hard from the bottom up to survive and make a living. It is a familiar story to many immigrants and diaspora people groups in Canada today. It's a story that resonates for Christian immigrants from all around the world who arrive in the wealthy and "first-world" nation of Canada with the hope of a new life and the intent to work diligently for it. But they often find themselves facing a myriad of challenges that range from job security, poverty, prejudice, racism, language barriers, cultural stigma, unfamiliar government policy, different education paradigms, complicated municipal bylaws, getting a driver's license, and the like. But it's also a story that resonates with these diaspora people groups because their God is the same Living God as the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph – all sojourners in their own right.

What also makes Joseph's story so compelling, is the number of times he had to start over. He did it from ground up, from the depths of the dungeons, with diligence, integrity and dedication; that is inspiring. One gets the sense that Joseph knew that if he did it once, he could do it again. His tenacity and perseverance were characteristic of those who just need an opportunity and are unafraid to put everything they have into their work, if they only get a chance to apply their trade and skills. It truly is a "never give up" attitude. However, this is not rooted in the "Western Dream" of success and comfort or a naïve sense of optimism. No, Joseph's tenacity was rooted in God, who gave him God's dreams, and upon whom he relies to make things happen. Joseph brought everything he had to the table, in all circumstances, so that God could use all of him according to his purpose.

We must acknowledge that it was in this “pressure-cooker” context of betrayal, dislocation, humiliation, injustice, and desperation that Joseph was given the unexpected opportunity to truly grow in character and ability. This was Joseph’s proverbial “University of Hard Knocks.” The latent creativity, industrious resourcefulness and brilliant management skills that most likely would not have developed under the coddling of his father, blossomed in this adversarial and strenuous setting. This is how God works. God’s way is not always easy, but he is good. For his glory, and his redemptive plan, he chooses people from certain points in history so that through them, his will unfolds.

When we consider the milestones of Joseph’s journey, those who have made Canada their new home will recognize the similarities between their stories and Joseph’s. Those who are the established “Second Nations” in Canada will be reminded of what their own ancestors experienced migrating from the Old World: being uprooted from a home, experiencing an entirely different culture, and finding a way to cope with unforeseen challenges. Even today, the discrimination and prejudice against those who are foreign born and/or visible minorities present real challenges that are not only social, but emotional and psychological in nature.

Thus, one must take seriously the current migration patterns, the development of communication networks, the condition of Western churches, global economic trends, the advantages of multi-lingual workers, and the command to make disciples of all nations, as we prayerfully consider the integral role of diaspora churches in Canada. Why are all these people groups coming here to Canada? How is God moving in their own personal challenges of sojourning and overcoming the struggles of living in a new nation? How is all of this a part of his redemptive plan, not only for Canadian churches but for all the people groups involved, domestic and abroad? How will God use the children of immigrants for his glory, those who have an intuitive fluidity in both cultures (for many, in more than two languages and cultures)? How can we as pastors, leaders and influencers be the stepping stone that uplifts and equips this young diaspora generation to be collectively used by God in the same way that he used Joseph?

Towards the end of his life, Joseph was also able to recognize God’s hand and favour in all the trials he had endured. With this refined faith, he is able to say to his brothers, whose betrayal unceremoniously forced

him to embark on this epic journey: “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” (Genesis 50:19-21)

The life journeys of the diaspora people groups are all ultimately God’s. Whether or not Canadian Churches will be active participants, or complacent onlookers of that history, depends on the choices we make today. Regardless, God is good to his people and he will accomplish his will through them.

### **Moses: Identity Crisis and Inner Conflict**

Moses’ life journey is no easier or less complicated than Joseph’s. It is worth noting that Joseph’s story, which culminated in the tribes of Israel living in the land of Goshen in Egypt, was directly linked to Moses’ life. He was the man chosen by God to do just the opposite: lead Israel out of Egypt and back to Canaan. Four hundred years had passed since Joseph’s death and the time had come for the LORD to deliver his people out of Egypt.

Moses was introduced in Exodus 2 as an infant, far too young to have been aware of the massacre of baby boys that annihilated his generation. By the grace of God and the wisdom of his mother, he escaped and was brought up as the precious adopted son of Pharaoh’s daughter. Moses, a Hebrew by blood, became part of the Egyptian elite. He was raised as an Egyptian in every sense of the word and didn’t seem to give much thought to his “Hebrew-ness.” Then one day, he was confronted by an uncomfortable reality that challenged his identity as part of the Egyptian royal house.

As Moses observed an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, something inside him resonated, and looking to make sure that no one was watching, he killed the Egyptian and hid the body in the sand. Clearly, in that moment, as Egyptian as he may have been, Moses felt some sort of affinity with the Hebrew slaves. The next day, when he saw two fellow Hebrews fighting with each other, he intervened only to discover that he was not “one of them.” How could someone who had not laboured as a slave, rightly be considered part of the Hebrew people? He was not one of them because he hadn’t shared their experience; but he was also not Egyptian because he didn’t share their blood. He was neither/nor, so he fled from Pharaoh who sought his life, and from the

life he once enjoyed, because everything he knew about himself no longer added up. This cognitive dissonance led to an identity crisis and drove him into the wilderness for 40 years. There he met God, and there he was called to his divine purpose.

Moses' identity crises, the feeling of being neither/nor, is a familiar struggle for the young diaspora generation. They are neither fully Korean or Indian or African (as they didn't experience the fullness of the culture or national identity of their parents), nor fully Canadian, because they are visibly non-Canadian-looking. Their manners, thinking paradigms, language, foods and customs, all have residual imprints and influences from the culture of their parents. They live in stereotypes that are reinforced by pop-culture (all Asians are good at math, or all Africans run fast). Their perception of themselves as others view them, leads to an identity crisis. This leaves many wandering in their own proverbial desert for years: feeling lonely, isolated, and not really understood. These 1.5 or second generation youth create their own communities and search, with each other, for their identity. Many, like Moses' experience with the burning bush, find peace and stability when they find their ultimate identity in Christ.

Still, their bi-cultural, bi-lingual (sometimes multi-lingual) world is their reality, as it was for Moses; ultimately, it was to his advantage. One can safely assume that Moses' years as Pharaoh's daughter's son, gave him particular insights into Egyptian government, infrastructure, traditions, customs and beliefs. On the other hand, having his own Hebrew mother as a nursemaid kept him rooted in his Hebrew culture. The comparison to immigrant children is obvious. They are immersed in "regular" school five days a week and then have to go to Korean/Chinese/ (insert language group) language classes on Saturdays, being told that there is limited or no English permitted in the household. The time came for Moses when the two worlds collided and it took 40 years of withdrawal and God's revelation to bring together a vision that only the Living God could give. Although their Egyptian context shaped them, God's purpose for them was to create a unique chosen nation through which he could manifest his redemption. In the same way, as time progresses, we will see clearly how God will bring together the many worlds of the diaspora generations and all the subtleties of navigating their culture for his glory.

This "identity crisis" is the strength of the diaspora youth. Because they are neither/nor, and because they have a foot in two cultures, they

understand the two worlds they are called to bridge. Moses was the right person for the job precisely because of his Egyptian upbringing. When he returned to Egypt as God's mouthpiece, he was returning to familiar territory but with a different purpose. Having lived the Egyptian high-life and then meeting the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in the burning bush, he had both the practical knowledge of Egypt and the experiential knowledge of encountering God. This more than adequately equipped him for God's purpose and, as reluctant as he may have been, he took on the great task of leading Israel out of Egypt. Again, like Joseph, God primed Moses for this particular calling, in that day and age, for his purpose.

The diaspora youth have many layers of challenges. These struggles are inter-cultural and inter-generational. However, as each year goes by, we see a generation slowly emerging that is able to balance and hold the two worlds in tension. With God's providence and guidance, they are carving out for themselves a unique niche in this world and, just like Joseph and Moses, God will use them for his purpose.

### **Ruth: A Moabite Woman in Israel**

The story of Ruth the Moabite is an extraordinary one of courage, boldness and resilience. Ruth is praised for her loyalty to Naomi, her mother-in-law, and rightly so. However, we forget the kind of grit, in addition to compassion and loyalty, that it took for Ruth to fully commit to Naomi as she did. The Ancient Near East was not a woman's world and Ruth's determination and faith shone brilliantly when she refused to abandon her mother-in-law, leaving the familiarity of her own homeland to make a life in Bethlehem with Naomi.

The story of Naomi and Ruth is in many ways tragic. In the time of the Judges, famine ravaged the land where the tribes of Israel lived. Elimelek and his wife, Naomi, uprooted their family and migrated to Moab in an attempt to find a better life. In today's world, they might be considered refugees. Elimelek died, leaving Naomi with their two sons, Mahlon and Kilion. Eventually, the young men married Orpah and Ruth, and life was decent for several years. The biblical account tells us that shortly afterwards, both her sons died. In a world where the presence of a male in the family meant stability, protection, food, shelter, social status and a secure lifestyle, losing her husband and both sons was a devastating blow on many levels; not to mention the

incredible emotional loss of losing family members. It was a life plagued by tragedy and loss and it left the women in a desperate situation.

Understandably, there was some bitterness in Naomi's heart, but she released her young daughters-in-law from familial obligations so they could return to their homeland and go back to their families, to find new husbands so that they still could have a happy life. Naomi was ruined and would retreat home to Bethlehem, broken and defeated. Understandably, the one daughter-in-law, Orpah, at Naomi's urging, returned home. It was Ruth's behaviour that was odd. She chose to stay with Naomi and return to Bethlehem. She would now be the alien in a foreign land.

The Old Testament laws demonstrate quite clearly that God cares deeply about the alien, foreigner and sojourner who come to live among the people of Israel. His care and concern for the poor and disenfranchised are also obvious in laws which give clear instructions for how Israel should treat the widows, orphans and impoverished. But we also know that the prescribed laws were not closely obeyed, and that in the area of social justice, Israel consistently fell far short of the law's demands.

What was most telling about the personal danger Ruth faced in coming to Bethlehem, was Boaz's intentional instructions to the young men not to harm or molest her. As a Moabite woman working for hire, the racial stigma, and being alone without a male protector, would most likely have led to mistreatment and harassment, were it not for the explicit warning by the master. Furthermore, Boaz also went out of his way to limit, as much as he could, her shame and humiliation. He gave instructions to the men to allow her to gather from the stalks and to even pull some out for her to collect. She might not have known how to properly work in the fields but she worked hard. By God's grace, she met Boaz who protected her from immediate danger and, as the family's closest eligible kinsman-redeemer, eventually married her.

Ruth was a diaspora young woman, surviving through tragic loss, leaving her homeland with her aging mother-in-law and looking for a means to support the only family she still had. She was willing to find work wherever necessary in order to survive. This story is a telling account of the plight of diaspora women, then and today. While there have been progressive advancements in many areas of human rights, women's rights in too many parts of the world have remained relatively unchanged. In

many cultures, young girls, still children, are given in marriage to men who are old enough to be their fathers. Husbands and male guardians determine how they dress, where they go and what is appropriate. In too many countries, girls are still not educated, they work all day in factories, and women do not have the right to vote. Women and children are the targets of human traffickers and victims are often the ones blamed, when they themselves are the ones being harassed and raped. Many customs and traditions are male-dominated, male-centred, male-oriented and male-perpetuated. Even in 2018, it is still predominantly a man's world; not everyone is as fortunate as Ruth to have a Boaz.

With the growing influx of foreign-born people in Canada, many of these women come looking for an opportunity to experience all the freedoms and rights they had never received in their home country. They are willing to work hard, study, learn and immerse themselves in the culture and lifestyle of their new home. These women are a largely untapped human resource and we have many bold and resilient women like Ruth amongst our diaspora churches. Some are old, some are young; they are intelligent and resourceful, rich in knowledge and experience. They need mentorship and guidance, encouragement and community, and enrich our communities with their culture and unique perspectives. What many of these diaspora young women need is an opportunity: an opportunity to learn, grow, and blossom as strong leaders of their communities and families.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Not everyone ends up in the upper echelons of their adopted nation's social strata like Joseph, Moses, and Ruth. Even so, each one of these biblical characters had extremely difficult lives, the kind that most of us in the modern, Western world will never have to endure. Many of our diaspora sisters and brothers have comparable stories, not only in the spiritual sense but in the literal, uproot-your-life, come-with-nothing, desperation-and-hard-work, sense. And if God is sovereign, we must conclude that the Lord is bringing these people groups to Canada, according to his plan, for his kingdom purposes. The question for Canadian churches is: "How will we respond?"

How will the Canadian church respond to fellow sisters and brothers of faith who arrive here and establish communities of faith in their own language, with the cultural influences of their homeland? Have we

made room for them? Could we do more by sharing, not only our real estate and buildings, but also our other resources, networks, and connections to encourage and empower these diverse communities in their faith journey in Canada? Have we grafted them into our Canadian faith journey, which includes a rich history of sending missionaries to some of the very nations from which they come? Have we given them opportunities to lead, and teach us about God's kingdom?

How will Canadian Christians respond to non-believers who arrive in this country? Can we welcome them and participate together in this opportunity to share the Gospel with people groups that were once so far away? Or do we feel that they are encroaching on our nation and interfering with our way of life? Has xenophobia and ignorance dictated how we react as we slowly become outnumbered by the foreign born, blaming "the other" for the lack of jobs, rising crime rates, and increased congestion on the roads? Or will we welcome this as a God-given shift in global migration patterns that brings the nations to Canadian churches, so we can help and point others towards the saving grace of Jesus Christ?

What is clear is that God used the circumstances of the day to sovereignly move in the lives of Joseph, Moses and Ruth, bringing them to where they needed to be, through all the difficulties and suffering, so that they might be used for God's greater plan that continued far beyond their life on earth. The lives of Joseph, Moses and Ruth, in addition to the entire corpus of the Bible, demonstrate that God wants his people to be ready to move according to his guidance and purpose. Even in the Acts of the Apostles, the persecution of the Church scattered the believers, thereby spreading the Gospel to the known ends of the earth. Paul's own conversion led to a lifetime of travelling for the sake of the Great Commission. One can only imagine how Paul might have taken advantage of all our modern advancements and migration trends, had they been available to him. What a prime opportunity we have for such an age as this!

It would be false and misleading to suggest that every diaspora young person will be used as a travelling missionary in a grand way to influence history. But perhaps that's no longer the most effective strategy in a world where monarchies and empires are falling by the wayside in place of the global village, where rising democracies, and social media platforms provide opportunities for those who previously

had no voice. On the other hand, it is absolutely and unequivocally necessary to emphasize that young, diaspora young leaders have a unique “experiential DNA” that exposes them to the kind of lived-knowledge that can truly broaden their shoulders, deepen their character, and equip them with an intuitive knowledge of the global village. These experiences influence and shape them in a way that comfort, stability, formal networks or nepotistic opportunities cannot.

We can identify God’s hand in Joseph’s, Moses’ and Ruth’s lives and acknowledge God’s sovereignty. Perhaps the metamorphosis of our own culture and the increasing diversity of our Canadian cities is an opportunity for the advancement of the kingdom of God. Furthermore, while the struggles of diaspora churches, families and young leaders are very real, the tension in their lives becomes a springboard for this particular generation to be uniquely used by God for his purposes. The Canadian church can be a part of this great movement, or we can let the opportunity pass by and watch it all unfold from the sidelines. What we cannot do, is say that we were never given the chance.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. Lisa Pak uses three biblical characters for case studies. Which one do you most resonate with and why?
2. Moses faced an identity crisis of being neither a Jew nor an Egyptian. Have you experienced that? How did you feel? How did you resolve the tension? How could a diaspora church better address the second generation’s sense of being in-between, and neither/nor.
3. Lisa Pak asks: How can we as pastors, leaders and influencers be the stepping stone that lifts up and equips this young diaspora generation to be collectively used by God in the same way that he used Joseph? What do we need to sacrifice to let the next generation lead?
4. What can we do to help new immigrants find their way? How could we make a big impact for a low cost? This would be a great question to brainstorm with your youth group, Bible study group, or Sunday school class.



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