

# Migration and Mission

According to the book of Acts

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## Abstract

After a brief survey of migration in the Bible, this article examines migration – be it voluntary or enforced – in the Book of Acts. Acts describes in Stephen’s speech in surprising detail experiences of migration in Israel’s past and its theological implications. According to Acts, many early Christian missionaries served in places that were not their places of origin, voluntarily or by force: the disciples ended up in Jerusalem and eventually at the ends of the earth. Others had come to Jerusalem from elsewhere even before encountering the Gospel and ministered throughout the Eastern Mediterranean world as they became involved in mission. Early Christian mission is closely related to migration and dislocation, voluntary or by force, led by the Spirit and for the sake of the Gospel. Repeatedly missionaries had to flee in order to avoid persecution. Despite the tragedy and suffering involved, there were also great opportunities, which were readily seized: the Gospel moved forward. A final section reflects on the significance of this portrayal for the church and its mission in the 21st century.

**Key words:** Mission, migration, refugees, Old Testament, New Testament, the Book of Acts, Paul, Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinth, Ephesus

## 1. Introduction

The Bible tells of many instances of forced or voluntary migration<sup>2</sup> and of refugees, and also mentions the material aspects of such dislocations, although these are less prominent. Some of its main characters are migrants and refugees. A few examples have to suffice: called by God, Abraham left his home in Ur and came to Canaan (Gen 11:31–12:6). From there a famine caused him to go to Egypt. Back in the land promised to him, he lived a semi-nomadic life. For a number of years, Jacob was “on the run”. Being sold off as a slave Joseph came back to Egypt and ended

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<sup>2</sup> In this essay, migration is used in the broadest sense as “descriptive of different forms of transience involving degrees of choice and compulsion”, so Hanciles 2007:225. For definition, historical survey and various theories of migration see also Hanciles 2003:146f; for recent surveys of the biblical evidence see Ott 2012, Rubesch 2012, Ruiz 2011 and Santos 2012.

up saving the people of Egypt and his own family.<sup>3</sup> Moses lived as a refugee in the land of Midian for decades before returning to Egypt. The rest of his life was spent as a migrant leader. After centuries in forced labour in Egypt, the Israelites left and migrated for forty years through the wilderness before they returned to the country promised to their forefathers. Elimelech and Naomi and their sons left the land of Israel and found refuge in Moab due to a famine (Ruth 1:1f). Ruth, counted among the ancestors of David and of Jesus (Matt 1:5), migrated with her mother-in-law Naomi to Israel and had to cope in a different environment (1:6–22).<sup>4</sup>

Later on in their history the people of Israel were dispersed and deported on several occasions, spent seventy years in exile and faced harsh circumstances. This exile led to a number of religious innovations such as the synagogue, which guaranteed the spiritual survival of Israel through the centuries without cult, temple and land (see Levine 2010). Her faith proved its validity and flexibility under a variety of circumstances. A number of Old Testament books, such as Ezekiel, originated during the exile, reflect this experience or were in other ways important for coming to terms theologically with the exile and the return to the land. Returning to the land of Israel at the end of the exile meant migration and the cumbersome rebuilding the domestic, cultic and municipal infrastructure as well as the faith and identity of Israel (see the instructive survey by Kugel 2012).

In the Old Testament narrative and prophetic traditions, migration due to dispersion and deportation appears as divine judgement. Thus it is by no means harmless and may not be idealised. The account of paradise and the fall of humanity closes with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the presence of God (Gen 3,23f). For murdering his brother, Cain was condemned to be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth (Gen 4:12). Through disturbing communication in Babel, God dispersed humanity in all directions (Gen 11:8f). The Old Testament ideal is that each Israelite lives on his own piece of land off the fruit of his labour (“every man under his vine and under his fig tree and no one shall make them afraid”, Micah 4:4).

The consequences of these migrations often were poverty, loss of status and other disadvantages for some or all; at times these movements also meant wealth

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<sup>3</sup> For Abraham and Josef see Carroll 2013:12–18. In his survey, “More Than Neighbours? The Old Testament as a Resource for Thinking About Migration”, Stime (2016:6) writes: To demonstrate just how much this narrative [of the Patriarchs, Gen 12–50] corresponds to the contemporary environment, one can categorise Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the terms used by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Abraham begins as a voluntary migrant, but then lives in Egypt as an environmentally induced, externally displaced person. Isaac is born to immigrant parents, and he subsequently becomes an environmentally induced, internally displaced person. Finally, Jacob is a third-generation migrant who involuntarily migrates to seek asylum for fear of physical harm. Jacob does eventually repatriate by choice, but he lives out the remainder of his life as an immigrant.

<sup>4</sup> See also Gen 12:10; 42:1–38; 43:1–34; 46:1–47:12.

and interesting careers for some, such as that of Daniel or Nehemiah in Babylon or Persia.

At the beginning of the New Testament, John the Baptist leaves home, stays in the Judean wilderness and later on preaches and baptises on the banks of the river Jordan (Luke 1:39, 80; 3:3). Due to a Roman decree, Jesus is born not at home in Nazareth, but in Bethlehem where he ends up in a manger (Luke 2:1–7). Shortly thereafter his family has to flee to Egypt and stay there as refugees (Matt 2:13–15). Later on they return to Galilee as they could not stay in Judea due to the threat imposed by the reign of Archelaus. Later Jesus leaves home to start his itinerant ministry in Galilee, all over Judea and eventually in Jerusalem.

Following their call to discipleship, Jesus' disciples voluntarily leave their families, homes and careers in Galilee to follow Jesus. They become the model of "migrant discipleship", following their wandering Lord who said: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:57–62). At the same time they are promised that they will receive a hundred-fold what they leave behind and also inherit eternal life (Matt 19:29).

The Book of Acts (our focus below) abounds with accounts of migration. Almost in passing, the letters of Paul testify to his enormous mobility<sup>5</sup> and the many journeys of his co-workers and mission partners. First Peter – the letter that deals with Christian suffering in most detail – speaks of Christians metaphorically as "aliens and exiles" (2:11) although they continue to live in their places of origin. Their loss of status and their alienation are compensated for by becoming part of the people of God and a royal priesthood called to proclaim the Gospel by word and exemplary behavior (see Stenschke 2008). Revelation, with its sweeping eschatological vision for the Church and the world, was written while its author was exiled on the island of Patmos (Rev 1:9).

This article focuses on voluntary and forced migration in Acts.<sup>6</sup> Its emphasis is on migration experiences in Israel's past as recalled and interpreted in Stephen's speech in Acts at a crucial junction in the narrative, on the migration of Christians and on its consequences for the spread of the Gospel. Aware of the disruption and social and material consequences that this migration entailed (hardly mentioned in Acts), this essay examines the portrayal of Acts and focuses on the opportunities that migration involved for the first Christians and their missionary endeavour (this is where Luke's focus is). Therefore, far from doing justice to the complex phenomenon of migration (for surveys see Hanciles 2007 and Payne 2012), it addresses

<sup>5</sup> According to Schnabel 2008:121f, Paul – as far as we know –, travelled altogether some 25.000 km; some 14.000 km of which he travelled by land.

<sup>6</sup> Detailed interaction with the recent research on Acts is not possible; see the discussion in the commentaries of Pervo 2009, Schnabel 2012 and Keener 2012, 2013 and 2014.

only one aspect. It does not intend to draw a romantic picture or idealise migration. It shows that – despite and in all tragedy which it involved – these movements of early Christians, be they voluntary or forced, opened new opportunities for the Gospel. The portrayal of Acts can encourage the Church today, be it the many Christians “on the move” themselves for whatever reason, or the Church in places to which people migrate or both. In the main part of the essay we follow the narrative of Acts. This is followed by an analysis and reflection of some implications for the mission of the church today.

## 2. Migration and Mission in Acts

Many of the people mentioned in Acts – be they Jews, Christians and also Gentiles – appear in places where they were not born. The causes of this and its consequences vary significantly: some moved voluntarily, others followed their leaders or were placed by a higher authority, others had to leave as refugees because of persecution.

### 2.1 Migration in Acts 1–6

Acts 1 finds the larger group of about 120 Galilean disciples in Jerusalem where Jesus commands them to stay and wait for the coming of the Spirit (1:4). He also announces that later on, they will be “on the move” to “all Judea, Samaria and even to the ends of the world” (1:8). The events of the following narrative are the fulfilment of this commission.

The miracle of Pentecost is witnessed by Jews from Jerusalem but also by Jews who had returned from the Jewish Diaspora and who now live in Jerusalem. Acts 2:9–11 lists fifteen regions or ethnic groups (see Stenschke 2013). In this way, all of Israel is present to witness the coming of God’s eschatological Spirit on Israel gathered and restored in Jesus and the community of his disciples. The many people who come to faith that day will have included Diaspora Jews (including proselytes) who live in the city or who came as pilgrims for the Jewish feast of Pentecost. As they return to their places of residence they spread the good news. From its very beginning the Church contained people with different geographical and cultural backgrounds.<sup>7</sup>

As the group of 120 disciples and many of the recent converts leave their professions and means of living behind, the community can only live through the sharing of goods, which is reported in Acts 2:44f and 4:32–5:11.<sup>8</sup> It is their response to

<sup>7</sup> Their universal perspective can be seen in their praise of God as the Creator of heaven and earth (4:24).

<sup>8</sup> In this context, Luke introduces Barnabas, a Levite from Cyprus, who either lived in Jerusalem or had come for the feast to Jerusalem and stayed on after becoming a Christian (4:36f).

poverty caused by migration. The particular circumstances of this congregation require financial assistance from other Christians later on (Acts 11:27–30; 24:17).

The fierce conflict in Acts 4f is due not only to the miracles and proclamation of the apostles but also to the fact that these *Galilean* apostles (2:7) challenge the legitimacy of the Jewish leadership on their very own turf, the precincts of the temple in Jerusalem. They are perceived to be “out of place” – a fate which is experienced by many migrants.

According to Acts 6, the Christian community includes widows and other Hellenistic Jews from a Diaspora Jewish background who at some point came to Jerusalem for religious reasons.<sup>9</sup> To solve the tensions arising from the neglect of these widows, seven men with Greek names – who themselves probably had a Hellenistic background, including Stephen and Nicolaus, a proselyte from Antioch – are chosen for this task. Before joining the Christian movement, these Hellenistic Jews probably belonged to the expatriate synagogue or synagogues (see 24:12)<sup>10</sup> consisting of “Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia” (6:9).<sup>11</sup>

From its beginning the Christian community includes people with various experiences of migration. For different reasons they came to Jerusalem from Galilee and different areas of the Jewish diaspora. With all their appreciation of Jerusalem and its spiritual significance they know that their God is not limited to this place. They bring to the task experiences and abilities, which are highly significant for the spread of the Gospel beyond areas defined by Jewish language and culture.

## 2.2 Migration Experiences in Stephen’s Speech (Acts 7)

Perhaps surprisingly, a major concentration of the theme of migration, of refugees, of existence in different places and the spiritual challenges which this involves, appears in Stephen’s speech. These themes make an important contribution to his defence over against the false accusations of having spoken against the temple and the Law (6:13f).<sup>12</sup> In his summary of Israel’s history from a particular perspective,

<sup>9</sup> On the Hellenists as Greek speaking Jews see Zugmann 2009:89–294; particularly on Jewish Hellenists who had returned to Jerusalem from the Diaspora pp. 271–294.

<sup>10</sup> Pervo 2009:166: “... the grammar allows more than one interpretation. ... There may be one, two, or as many as five synagogues”; see also Zugmann 2009:271–277.

<sup>11</sup> On their number and significance see Schnabel 2012:344–346. Regarding the freedmen, Schnabel notes:

The freedmen were Jews who had been manumitted as slaves by their owners or were descendants of emancipated Jewish slaves. Philo mentions Jews who lived in Rome, most of whom had been taken as captives to Italy (e.g., after Pompey’s conquest of Jerusalem in 63 BC) and who continued to live in Rome after emancipation. ... Some of these Roman Jews had returned to live in Jerusalem (345).

<sup>12</sup> That these were false accusations and not an adequate summary of the theology and proclamation of Stephen and the larger group of Hellenists has rightly been emphasised by Haacker 2014.

Stephen describes the fate of Israel's patriarchs and their descendants as migrants and God's dealing with Israel outside the later land of promise.<sup>13</sup> At this position in the narrative, the speech anticipates and legitimises the developments, which immediately follow it, i.e. the movement of the Gospel and its heralds beyond the confines of Jerusalem: God's presence and activity are not limited to this city. With his blessings and activity, God cannot be confined to one place, but is also at work elsewhere.

Stephen starts with Abraham's migration: "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran" (7:2). Abraham is called to leave his land and relatives behind and wander to a strange country. After leaving the land of the Chaldeans and a stop-over in Haran, "God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living" (7:4). Despite the divine promise and his exemplary obedience, "God did not give him any of it as a heritage, . . . but promised to give it to him as his possession and to his descendants after him" (7:5). God announced that "his descendants would be resident aliens in a country belonging to others, who would enslave them and mistreat them for four hundred years" (7:6). The history of Israel and of God's covenants starts with God's revelation and actions in other regions (God's glory is not limited to the temple) on behalf of landless migrants, a long stay in a foreign country and the experience of massive suppression. However, God also announced his their eventual liberation.

God was with Joseph, when he was sold off to Egypt (7:9). His presence, his readiness to intervene and his gifts are not limited to the land or the extended family at home: in Egypt, "God rescued him from all his afflictions, and enabled him to win favour and to show wisdom when he stood before the Pharaoh". Initially this forced migration meant loss of status and poverty. Later the former migrant and slave was appointed ruler over Egypt. Already in the past the migration experience of Abraham's descendants became a blessing for them and for other people. Later Stephen accounts the famine in Egypt and Canaan and the move of Jacob and his descendants to Egypt were they increased and multiplied (14f).

Stephen tells in surprising detail the biography of Moses (7:17–39) who started out as a slave child threatened by exposure and who eventually became a member of the royal household. Later Moses fled and ended up as resident alien and she-

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<sup>13</sup> The theme later reappears in Paul's sermon to the Diaspora Jews and God-fearers of the synagoge of Antioch in Pisidia, itself outside the land of Israel (13:14–52). This summary of the history of Israel speaks of Israel's stay in Egypt (God made the people great during their stay as migrants in the land of Egypt), the exodus ("and with uplifted arm he led them out of it") and the wandering in the wilderness ("for about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness") before God gave them the land as an inheritance (13:17–20). This summary also emphasises that crucial events in Israel's history happened outside of the land (God increases, leads and bears his people).

pherd in Midian (7:29). Forty years later, he was called in the remote wilderness of Mount Sinai – in yet another land – to deliver the people. Even there was “holy ground”, sanctified by the presence of God of the fathers who reveals himself to Moses (see also 7:38). God was fully aware of the fate of his migrant people and ready to act: “I have surely seen the mistreatment of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to rescue them” (7:34). Divine seeing, hearing, coming and saving also applied in Egypt. God’s intervention led to the exodus and forty years of wandering in the wilderness (7.36).<sup>14</sup> During this period, the covenant was made, Israel received the living oracles of the law (7:38) and other events occurred that shaped Israel’s identity. God knew of their going through this great wilderness (Deut 2:7).

Stephen’s speech emphasises that the times away from the land of Israel (and away from the temple) and the times of migration were periods of intensive experiences of God (delivery, miracles and revelation), but also times of threatened and refused loyalty to God: there were the rejection of Moses, God’s appointed leader of the people, disobedience, the paradoxical desire to return to Egypt (7:39, to the place of misery and of threat to their very existence, 7:19), the incident of the golden calf and further idolatry (7:40–43). Following the Old Testament prophets, the deportation and the period of exile are understood as divine punishment for Israel’s prolonged idolatry (“You took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship”): “so I will remove you beyond Babylon” (7:43). Despite these charges, Stephen’s survey indicates that over many centuries Israel experienced God in different places and kept its identity outside of the land.

Already during their wandering, the ancestors had the tent of testimony in their midst, made according to a divine pattern (7:44). Wandering about and the presence of God are not mutually exclusive. Something as fragile as a moveable tent can conform to divine pattern. In contrast to “houses made with human hands” (7:48), God is not limited to buildings of stone and certain places. He was with his people as they moved.<sup>15</sup> Solomon’s temple, “built with human hands”, is seen critically. It is understood as an effort to locate God in one place and thus to domesticate him (7:45–50), and this eventually leads to the accusations of v. 51–53.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to all human buildings and efforts to confine God on earth, Stephen gets to

<sup>14</sup> God’s presence was evident in the wonders and signs that Moses performed in Egypt, the Red Sea and in the wilderness (7:36).

<sup>15</sup> Acts 7:45 only briefly mentions that the coming of Israel meant the dispossession of the people who lived there previously. Their fate is not in view.

<sup>16</sup> If it were not for these references to Israel’s continued idolatry, the wilderness period would appear idealised.

behold the glory of God *in heaven* (7:55). There God and Jesus are to be found. This vision and confession lead to Stephen's martyrdom.

Stephen's account of the migration history of the patriarchs, Moses and of the people of Israel indicates that God's presence, calling, provision, compassion and action on behalf of his people are not limited to one place or land.<sup>17</sup> God, whose throne is in heaven and whose footstool is the earth (7:49), is the God of his wandering people, who is with them in salvation and judgement. In Stephen's perspective<sup>18</sup>, Israel's past as a migrant people is neither glorified, nor is it suppressed or denied. A semi-nomadic group who ends up in slavery for centuries, first rejects God's saviour, wanders through the wilderness and is disloyal to its divine deliverer. This is not a flattering account of origin in ancient cultures where honour and shame are pivotal values.

While directed at the opponents of the Christian movement and warning them not to repeat the mistakes of the past and calling them to repentance, Stephen's speech also constitutes an often neglected theological foundation of the impending Christian mission to the ends of the world: as in past times, God will be with those who go to the ends of the earth. His presence, action and salvation are not limited to one people and place. Understood in this way, Stephen's speech not only brings the Jerusalem -chapters to a close with an urgent warning but also has precisely at this position an important function in the narrative of Acts. It moves the audience to what is about to happen far away from the temple, at the borders of the land and well beyond. Also there God is with his migrating people and at work (see the explicit statements in that regard in Acts 11:21f; 14:27; 15:12; 16:14).

### 2.3 Migration and Mission in Acts 8–28

The persecution that arose after the death of Stephen scatters the Christians throughout Judea and Samaria (8:1f). The first move of the Gospel beyond the confines of Jerusalem is caused by persecution ("a severe persecution began against the church", 8:1, see also 8:3): "Now those who were dispersed went from place to place, proclaiming the word" (8:4). The first Christian missionaries are migrants who had come to Jerusalem and who now have to leave as refugees!<sup>19</sup> Kahl (2015:187) describes the unique qualification of these Diaspora Jewish Christians:

<sup>17</sup> As was the case with the Christians who were later dispersed from Jerusalem (see below), Abraham and his descendants gathered important experiences with their God during their wanderings and fate as migrants, and received decisive new insights. These were only possible as they were on the way.

<sup>18</sup> This is noteworthy, as the speech was not delivered by one of the main protagonists of the narrative, who belong to the circle of the Galilean apostles of Jesus. The Hellenist Stephen is prepared for and able to deliver this provoking interpretation of the history of Israel and her God whose very being is revealed in this history.

<sup>19</sup> See Schnabel 2004:670–701. Despite their taking the centre-stage in Luke's account, the procla-

According to Acts, *Jewish migrants from the Diaspora* played a major role in disseminating the Christian faith. This portrayal is also *historically* plausible: those Jews who had grown up in the multi-religious setting of the ancient Mediterranean world were better prepared for explicating the significance of the Gospel to non-Jews than their sisters and brothers in the faith in Judea or Galilee. *They* spoke the same language(s) as the non-Jews – primarily Koine-Greek – and *they* were able to act in a culturally sensitive manner. The Christ-believing Jews from the Diaspora were able to communicate plausibly the Gospel of God’s salvation which transcends all boundaries.<sup>20</sup>

With the word disperse (*diaspeiro*, διασπείρω) Luke draws on the Old Testament motif of dispersion (see de Hulster 2013), however with significant changes: now dispersion is not divine judgement through deportation and exile for Israelites who broke the covenant but becomes the experience of the obedient part of Israel and others benefit from it.<sup>21</sup> It is noteworthy that next to the dispersion -motif, the movements of these people are described with the verb “to go about” (*dierchomai*, διέρχομαι), which is later used in Acts 10:38 to characterise the ministry of Jesus: “he went about (*dialthen*, διήλθεν) doing good ...”.

Acts 8 describes the ministry of the evangelist Philip – one of these migrating Hellenists – in Samaria and to the Ethiopian Eunuch. God is at work in Samaria.<sup>22</sup> Acts 8:5–25 is the only account in Acts where seemingly a whole city accepts the Gospel. On the wilderness road to Gaza, Philip meets and evangelises and eventually baptises the Ethiopian who had come for religious reasons to Jerusalem and was now on his return journey to what is today Sudan (8:26–40).<sup>23</sup> Even though the direction of his journey is away from Jerusalem and the temple, he goes on his way rejoicing and takes the Gospel with him (8:39). After his dislocation by the Holy Spirit Philip finds himself in Ashdod and follows the pattern of the Hellenists of Jerusalem: “and as he passed through (*dierchomenos*, διερχόμενος) he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea” (8:40).

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mation of the Gospel is not limited to the apostles or Paul. A variety and large number of Christians participate in this calling; see Stenschke 2010.

<sup>20</sup> All translations into English by the author. The assumptions behind these statements regarding the Christians from Judea and Galilee are questionable in view of the high measure of Hellenisation, including the use of Greek, in these areas; for discussion see Zugmann 2009:205–294.

<sup>21</sup> Obviously dispersion in the Old Testament was also experienced by faithful and exemplary Israelites such as Daniel and his friends – the nations among whom they lived were blessed through them.

<sup>22</sup> On their way back to Jerusalem, Peter and John start their itinerant ministry of “proclaiming the good news to many villages of the Samaritans”, Acts 8:25; see Stenschke 1999:145–147.

<sup>23</sup> At the end of the chapter, Philip finds himself in Azotus, the OT Philistine city of Ashdod. From there he wanders north to Caesarea, proclaiming the good news in all the towns. There Paul meets him (Acts 21:8–14); see Spencer 1992.

God's salvific intention and action are not limited to Jerusalem or the people of Israel. Being forced to leave Jerusalem, being dispersed and embarking as refugees on a migrant existence is not the end of the nascent Christian movement but the origin of world-wide mission. Migration and mission go hand in hand.

Acts 9:2 refers to the people called "the disciples of the Lord" (9:1) as "those who belonged to the Way". "Wayfarers" is a prominent designation of Christians in Acts. "The way" refers to their identity and message (19:9,23; 22:4; 24:14,22; cf. 16:17: "a way of salvation"; 18:25f: "the way of the Lord").<sup>24</sup> Ernst observes that already in the travel narrative of Luke's Gospel, "Following Jesus and discipleship mean to participate in Jesus' journey to Jerusalem ... a fellowship of way-farers" (cf. Luke 9:23,57–62; 18:22,28).<sup>25</sup> Says Repo (1964:185f)

Probably the combination of the concept of the way with the person of Jesus has its origin already in the activities of the historical Jesus. The Synoptic gospels paint the portrait of Jesus as he is "on the journey" (*en te hodo*, ἐν τῇ ὁδῶ). John uses the verb περιπατεῖν "to walk about" (*peripatein*, 6:66; 11:54) for the wandering ministry of Jesus. As a teacher Jesus was indeed a true "peripatetic". Luke emphasised this aspect by composing a special travel narrative [Luke 9:51–19:27] and by selecting from the tradition those narratives, according to which the risen Lord literally appeared to those who were "on the road" (*en te hodo*, ἐν τῇ ὁδῶ, Luke 24:32; Acts 9:17). It is therefore no statistical coincidence that "way" appears so often in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts.

The disciples are no longer on their own "ways", but on the Lord's way. They are characterised not with *static* but with *dynamic* imagery (see also Acts 14:16). This designation agrees with the occurrences of the verb *dierchomai* (διέρχουμαι, mentioned above), which also characterises the main mode of Christian existence as one of movement.

Paul of Tarsus sets out to persecute the Christians in Damascus (9:1f). His knowledge or assumption that there will be Christians in Damascus proves to be correct (9:10,19). Presumably they are Hellenistic Jewish Christians who fled from

<sup>24</sup> For a survey see Stenschke 1999:327f and Trebilco 2012:247–271. Schneider 1982:25 notes: "Because this term can only be found in Acts and because it corresponds to the Lukan conception of the way ... it can be seen as a specifically Lukan designation for Christianity"; for detailed treatment see Repo 1964.

<sup>25</sup> 1993:249; similarly Fitzmyer 1986:242f: "discipleship as following of Jesus along his way". Repo 1964:180 concludes: "If we examine those passages in Acts where the faith of the Christians is called the "way", then we observe that "way" is related in the closest manner to the founder of this religion, Jesus".

Jerusalem due to the persecution mentioned in Acts 8:1–4. Perhaps they already led other Diaspora Jews to faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul encounters the risen and glorified Jesus and receives his divine calling *on the road* to Damascus (where Paul travelled to persecute the Christians).<sup>26</sup> The location of his calling (on the way, as he approached a Hellenistic city) becomes programmatic for his future ministry. Paul, once part of the religious establishment in Jerusalem, starts his long career as a migrant missionary.<sup>27</sup> At the beginning this meant ministry in Damascus (Acts 9; see Paul's own account of his early missionary career in Gal 1f). As a refugee from Jerusalem, Paul returns via Caesarea to his home town of Tarsus in Cilicia (9:30; cf. 22:3) and apparently stays there for a longer period until Barnabas brings him to Antioch (11:25). During this period the Gentile Christians of Syria and Cilicia, mentioned in the letter written in Jerusalem after the Apostolic Council (15:23) and later visited by Paul (15:41), probably came to faith through his itinerant ministry.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly Peter ministers outside of Jerusalem, “going here and there (*dierchomai*, διέρχομαι) among all the believers” (9:32) in Lydda, Joppa and Caesarea (9:32–10:48). After a period of locally confined service in Jerusalem, “going here and there” becomes the new mode of Peter's ministry. Busse (2011:777) notes regarding the verb *dierchomai* (διέρχομαι):

The frequent use of the verb (31 occurrences) in Luke-Acts is particularly striking. According to Acts 10:38, the verb is the technical term for the missionary activities of Jesus in the country of the Jews and for the activities of his apostles (Luke 9:6) and other missionaries (Acts 20:6). ... The verb belongs to the Lukan “way”-terminology like *diaporeúomai*, *diodeúo*, *diabaíno* and *diaperáo*.<sup>29</sup>

During these wanderings in the border region, Peter receives divine affirmation (9:32–42). Spectacular miracles happen outside of Jerusalem, including the healing of a lame man (see 3:1–8) and the resurrection of Tabitha. On his journeys Peter stays in the house of “a certain Simon, a tanner” (9:43), a place that was unclean due to regular handling of unclean material. Going and staying here and there means for Peter to move out of his “comfort -zone” and to cross boundaries. However, it also involves new experiences and insights. On the roof of the tanner's

<sup>26</sup> Later this experience is supplemented by a vision and commission in the temple of Jerusalem (22:17–21).

<sup>27</sup> For a survey see Murphy O'Connor 1996 and Schnabel 2008.

<sup>28</sup> For a recent discussion of Pauline chronology see Riesner 2011.

<sup>29</sup> The verb is also used in Acts 15:41 of Paul's ministry: “He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches”.

house, Peter receives the vision, which challenges his core convictions and prepares him for the events to come.

A military placement brings Cornelius, centurion of the Italian Cohort in Caesarea, first into close contact with Judaism (“a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God”, 10:2; see Howell 2012) and then made the encounter with Peter and the “conversion” of both men possible. For him, this placement led to his participation in salvation. At the beginning of his sermon before Cornelius and the other Gentiles assembled in his house, Peter expresses the new insight that he gained on the tanner’s roof and on the way: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does good is acceptable to him” (10:34f). Without Peter’s moving about, without the experiences of God and the various encounters with people this recognition would not have been possible.

In his sermon, Peter describes the ministry of Jesus as follows: “he went about (*dierchomai*, *διέρχουμαι*) doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil” (10:38).<sup>30</sup> Despite Jesus’ longer stays in certain places (e.g. in Capernaum, as narrated in Luke’s Gospel), his ministry is summarised and remembered as that of an *itinerant* preacher and healer. While preaching, the Spirit comes on Gentiles in Caesarea, just as it happened in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Following the conversion of Cornelius, Peter agrees to stay for some days in his house (10:48). Again his going about leads him to transgress boundaries. Later he has to defend himself for this behaviour on this Spirit-initiated journey (“You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them”, 11:3).

With Acts 11:19, the account returns to those Hellenistic Christians who were scattered from Jerusalem after the death of Stephen (8:1–4). After the focus on Philipp and his ministry in Samaria and South-West Judea in chapter 8, the focus is now on those Hellenists who went to North to Phoenicia (see 15:3), across the sea to Cyprus and further North to Antioch (11:19). Their ministry is limited to the Jews in these areas. However, some of them, who originally came from Cyprus (like Barnabas, 4:36) and Cyrene in North Africa (see Luke 23:26; Acts 2:10; 6:9), spoke in Antioch not only to Jews but also to Gentiles, proclaiming the Lord Jesus (11:20). Their journey has taken them first from the Jewish diaspora to Jerusalem, now their way takes them from there to Syria and back to the Gentiles. This move and proclamation no longer happens due to special divine prompting (see 8:26–29; 10:9–10) but of their own insight and motivation. The breakthrough to systematic *Gentile* mission was achieved by migrating refugees with cross-cultural experience!

<sup>30</sup> For a survey of the biography of Jesus in the mission speeches of Acts see Stenschke 2014.

As with the Patriarchs and the wandering people of God in the wilderness, “the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord” (11:21). News of these events reached the church in Jerusalem.<sup>31</sup> Barnabas, himself from Cyprus (as were some of these Hellenists, 11:20), is sent by the church in Jerusalem to Antioch and sees the grace of God at work (11:23). He spends a whole year there and travels to Tarsus, where Paul stayed (9:30), to bring him along to Antioch. After a brief return to Jerusalem (11:27–12:25, the famine relief visit with the collection of the Antiochene church), Barnabas and Paul later return to Antioch. Together with Barnabas, Paul starts his migrant missionary career from there.<sup>32</sup> While the Hellenists initially are migrant-missionaries due to persecution, these men later become migrant-missionaries by ecclesial appointment (Barnabas)<sup>33</sup> and/or by appointment of the Holy Spirit and commission of the church (Acts 13:1–3).

Following his miraculous escape from prison, Peter leaves Jerusalem to save his life (Acts 12:17). From then onward he only returns one more time to Jerusalem (15:7–11). From what we know from other New Testament books, Peter migrated over long distances and periods and was active in different places. Apparently he was known to the Christians in Corinth (see Schnabel 2004:702–728).

From Acts 13 onward, Paul becomes the main and almost exclusive protagonist.<sup>34</sup> Due to divine commission (9:15; 13:2; 22:17–22: “far away to the Gentiles”), he combines periods of intensive travel or flights with (at times) longer stays in a geographically vast area (“from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum”, Rom

<sup>31</sup> Acts paints a vivid portrait of translocal communication and relationships between the Christian congregations of various places, for a survey see Stenschke 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Later on Barnabas sets out with Mark and ministers back in Cyprus where he was born and had previously ministered with Paul (15:39). Later church tradition reports his extensive ministry on the island, for a survey see Öhler, 2002.

<sup>33</sup> Later on Judas Barsabbas and Silas, themselves leaders and prophets are sent from Jerusalem to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas (15:22,32–34).

<sup>34</sup> For the biographical presuppositions of this ministry see Kahl 2105:194; he notes also with regard to the particular abilities and strengths of Paul and other Diaspora Jewish Christians:

It were the abilities to communicate, which could only be acquired in transcultural contexts and settings, which proved to be decisive for the successful proclamation of the Gospel in the ancient Mediterranean world. This competence is what characterised the Diaspora Jews from the Hellenistic cities of the Roman empire. The Christ-believers among them, who lived and moved as migrants, constituted the backbone of the proclamation of the Gospel in the first century.

In addition, Kahl rightly reminds us that

With his focus on Paul, Luke has only preserved a very small section of the history of the dissemination of the Gospel in the first century ... Many other Jewish migrants from the diverse Diaspora were involved in this history – before, next to and after Paul. Some of them are mentioned in Acts more or less in passing. More detailed memories of their efforts have not been handed down to us.

15:19).<sup>35</sup> It appears that wherever and whenever the circumstances allowed, Paul stays sufficiently long in places until congregations are firmly established or other commitments call him elsewhere (for Paul's mission see Schnabel 2004:923–1485 and 2008).

*Antioch* becomes a place of refuge and ministry for the Hellenistic Jews of Jerusalem among Jews and Gentiles. Soon their ministry includes Gentile Christians. With all the ties which the emerging mission kept with Jerusalem (see 15:2), the churches of other places and areas become centres in their own right and start crucial initiatives under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Paul and Barnabas are sent from Antioch. Paul stays there for longer periods and keeps returning to the city and its Christian congregation (Acts 11:25–30; 12:25–13:4; 14:26–15:3,30–35; 18:22). Presumably his early material support comes from there. Paul stays in *Corinth*, another centre of early Christian mission, “a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them” (18:11; “After staying there for a considerable time”, 18:18). There Paul works for his own support. After a brief initial visit (18:19–21), Paul returns to *Ephesus* to minister there and from this centre for an extended period of ministry (19:1; “two years”, 19:10; three years in Asia, 20:31). Luke's full portrayal of Paul's missionary activities, in particular his many wanderings, cannot be described here in detail. Paul is the migrant-missionary par excellence in the New Testament. He himself speaks of his calling and ministry as the *course* (*δρομος*, δρόμος) he has to finish and ministry that he had received from the Lord Jesus (20:24; see Brändl 2006:276–279).

Later Paul is imprisoned for two years in Caesarea. For about six months Paul travels across the Mediterranean to Rome (including a shipwreck and spending a winter on Malta) and stays there as a Roman prisoner for another two years. All this happens not by accident, but in order to fulfil the calling which he received from the risen Lord (9:11–16; 22:17–21; 26:15–18). Luke does not deny or belittle the hardships and suffering which this migrant existence meant for Paul and his missionary companions (see also Paul's own list of hardships in 2 Cor 11:23–33 or Phil 4:11f). From his calling onward it is clear “how much he must suffer for the sake of Christ's name” (Acts 9:16).

On these journeys and also during longer stays, Paul is not alone but accompanied by a number of missionary colleagues and co-workers such as Barnabas, Silas and Timothy who share in his migrant-missionary existence and the hardships it entailed. For Paul and those with him, this ministry means loss of status and material means. For some of these journeys and longer stays, Paul is supported by

<sup>35</sup> This raises the question of where to draw the line between what we would consider “normal” travelling (with stays or more or less duration at some places) and migration. Here the focus is on Paul's longer stays in some places.

other Christians (see Phil 4:10–20), in other cases he works in his trade to cover his expenses (see Acts 18:3; see Walton 2011:220–233). In his charge to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:18–35, Paul declares that he worked with his own hands to support himself and his companions. In all this he gave an example that by such work he must support the weak. Paul's material belongings are limited. In addition to what he carries with him while travelling, we only know of the cloak that Paul left with Carpus at Troas, and some books and parchments which he requests Timothy to bring along (2 Tim 4:13).<sup>36</sup> Yet the promise of Jesus to his disciples also applied to Paul (Matt 19:29).

Luke's focus is on those Christians who have to leave Jerusalem voluntarily or due to persecution (8:3; 9:2), and follows their wanderings and ministry in different places. This focus is noteworthy in view of his otherwise strong interest in Jerusalem in the Gospel of Luke and in Acts 1–7, where the gathering and restoration of Israel takes place and is described in detail. While Luke does not directly criticise those who were able to or wanted to stay behind, he notes nevertheless that distrust, criticism and resistance to the divinely willed and initiated Gentile mission came from some Christians in Jerusalem: when they leave the city, it was only done in order to enforce validity of the Law and Jewish identity in the newly established Gentile Christian communities: "Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'unless you are circumcised according to the customs of Moses, you cannot be saved'" (15:1). Acts 15:24 indicates that these people belonged to the Christian community of Jerusalem. Acts 21:20 characterises many thousands of the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem as "zealous for the law" (21:20) just as Paul once was. They readily believe the false charges brought against Paul by his Jewish opponents. When Paul is about to demonstrate to them his own Jewish identity and abiding loyalty, he is arrested and loses his freedom (21:26–36). In Acts, the crucial impetus came from those who had to leave and migrated.

#### 2.4 Migration in Acts 17:26 and 18:1f

According to *Acts 17:26*, God "made all nations from one ancestor to inhabit the whole earth and allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they should live". Schnabel (2012:735) rightly rejects a philosophical understanding of this verse and argues that a historical interpretation of v. 26c–d is more plausible:

<sup>36</sup> On Paul's economic resources see Little 2005:22–46. The money which Paul later intended to pay for the Nazirite sacrifices in Jerusalem (21:23–26) probably came from the collection which Paul gathered in his Gentile Christian communities for the saints in Jerusalem.

... the “fixed times” are the various epochs in the history of the nations, and the “boundaries of their lands” are the political boundaries between the places where people live – whether cities, regions, provinces, or continents. Paul argues that cities, countries, and empires rise and fall during the course of history, both in terms of their political power and in terms of their political boundaries. The God whom Paul proclaims is the Creator of the world and of the human race, and He is the Lord of the history of the human race.

In view of the account of the Patriarchs in Acts 7 and of the commission of Jesus in Acts 1:8, this emphasis (“the boundaries of the places where they *should* live”) does not imply that any form of migration, of leaving allotted boundaries, is contrary to divine intention.

*Acts 18:1* indicates that the first Christians were not only affected by migration due to their commission by the risen Jesus and Jewish and Gentile persecution but also were affected by the larger politics of their time. In Corinth, Paul meets Aquila and Priscilla, who have recently come from Italy, “because [the Roman emperor] Claudius had commanded all Jews to leave Rome” (18:1f; see Rutgers 1998). The decree affected all Jewish inhabitants, including the Jewish Christians.<sup>37</sup> Probably for good reasons, Luke does not provide the reason for this order.<sup>38</sup> Due to this imperial decree, Paul meets this prominent early Christian missionary couple and works together with them in their common trade as tent-makers and in Christian ministry.<sup>39</sup> According to Acts 18:19, the couple later stays behind in Ephesus (cf. also 1 Cor 16:19). Romans 16:3 indicates that they returned to Rome after the death of Claudius in the autumn of 54 CE. There they could testify to Paul’s gospel and ministry and prepare his visit to Rome and on to Spain. 2 Timothy 4:19 suggests that they returned to Ephesus at a later point. Despite all the disadvantages and suffering it must have implied, this expulsion of the Jews from Rome furthered the cause and course of the early Christian mission.

## 2.5 Summary and Reflection

On first sight, refugees, dispersion and migration are not major themes in Acts. Yet on closer scrutiny this estimate needs revision. Like few other NT books<sup>40</sup>, Acts

<sup>37</sup> For the wider picture of mobility and migration in the Roman empire see De Ligt & Tacoma 2016.

<sup>38</sup> In his *Life of Claudius* 25, the Roman historian Suetonius indicates that the expulsion of the Jews because they constantly made disturbances at the instigation a certain “Chrestus”. This is usually taken to refer to unrest caused within the Jewish community due to Christian missionary activities. Thus it was a Roman response to the Christian mission; see Wolter 2014:30–40 and Longenecker 2011:69–75.

<sup>39</sup> See Stenschke 2009, van Thanh 2013 and Keller 2010.

<sup>40</sup> See 1 Cor 10:1–11; Hebr 3:5–4:13; for the latter passage and concept see Käsemann 1984.

deals with the phenomenon of the “wandering people of God” of both covenants, to use an expression that was already coined by Augustine. Therefore Kahl (2015:185) rightly concludes:

The formation and dissemination of early Christianity in the first century is inextricably and essentially linked to experiences of flight and migration. This fact is reflected so strongly nowhere else in the New Testament and developed in a narrative manner than in the Book of Acts, even although it is also more or less clearly discernible elsewhere in the New Testament.

Stephen’s speech indicates that such wandering was part and parcel of lives of the patriarchs and people of Israel in the Old Testament. During crucial periods of their existence they were on the move and gained important insights during their wanderings. During those periods they experienced God’s presence, blessing and salvation in different places, although their relationship with God was also threatened on the way. In contrast to the common ancient Near Eastern concept of national or local deities (cf. 1 Kgs 20:23–28; 2 Kgs 5:17), their God was not limited to particular regions, places and buildings. This relativises the temple in Jerusalem and the land of Israel, and contributes to the theological foundation for the world-wide ministry and relevance of the Church.

For Abraham, God’s call meant nomadic existence without a place of his own in a land that was not his. The journey to Egypt during a time of famine ended in centuries of slavery for Jacob’s descendants. For Moses, God’s appointed saviour, his flight to Midian meant loss of status and wealth and decades of menial labour.

Regarding the Christian church, Acts describes incidents of migration due to persecution, due to divine calling (be it the commission of the Twelve, of Paul, and of Paul and Barnabas), due to a commission by churches, or out of own concern for churches and other initiatives. Often there is a combination of several factors. Obedience to the commission of Jesus to be his witnesses outside the confines of Jerusalem begins with flight and migration. Like Abraham and his descendants during their wanderings, the early Christian migrant-missionaries experience that their God is with them even away from Jerusalem and the land of Israel. He knows no boundaries, but has all peoples in view (10:34f: “but in every nation . . .”). There is no place where God is not with them. Even in the deepest dungeon of a Roman prison in Philippi, God intervenes; in the midst of a terrible storm somewhere on the sea, the angel of the Lord finds Paul, comforts and saves him (Acts 27:23f). In Samaria, Caesarea, Antioch and beyond God affirms their proclamation with signs and wonders and opens the hearts of men and women (16:14). While they meet persecution and fierce resistance in some places, in many cases they and their message are well received.

In Luke's portrayal the followers of Jesus display an enormous dynamic and mobility. Dispersion and migration, which in the Old Testament often are a form of divine judgement or appears in the positive sense of journey or a wandering existence (see the patriarchal narratives or the Book of Jonah) become in the Book of Acts a distinctive trait at least of a part of the Christian community; now not as judgement, but as the consequences of faithful obedience to the commission of Jesus.

Luke only hints at the material consequences or difficulties that this migration involved.<sup>41</sup> His focus is on the opportunities that migration, enforced or voluntary, did provide and can provide for the Gospel. Material needs were met by sharing goods locally (in Jerusalem) and trans-locally (the Christians of Antioch share with Jerusalem, 11:27–30), by funding missionaries or labour. In many places the migrant-missionaries are well received and looked after.

The experiences of these migrant-missionaries and their missionary involvement led to the acceptance of the Gentiles into the people of God *as Gentiles*. They involved and brought about new and challenging experiences, insights and consequences for the self-understanding of the initially Jewish Christian communities, as, for example, Peter's surprised insight in Caesarea: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (10:34f) or the decrees of the so-called Apostolic Council (15:8–11, 14–21). *It also affected their behaviour (ready association and table fellowship with Gentiles, including neglecting all Jewish concerns for purity, e.g. 10:48; 16:34) and their relationship with their fellow Jews (11:2f; 15:1–5; 21:20<sup>ff2</sup>). By transgressing boundaries, through flight and migration, the Christians came to realise that the acceptance of the Gentiles into the people of God is the fulfilment of the promises of God (Luke 24:46–49), of the commission of the risen Jesus to his disciples (1:8), of the coming of the Holy Spirit and a consequence of the activities of the hand of God (e.g. 11:21). New insights and development and movement/migration are inseparably linked.*

*After these experiences the early Jewish Christian community of Jerusalem no longer was what it was at the beginning of the book of Acts. In the literary purpose of Acts, in narrating how the Christian community became what it now is (or at least what it should be like), and in describing its identity and develop-*

<sup>41</sup> While Luke's Gospel has an emphasis on the proper use of material possessions (see Beck 1989:28–54), the theme is less prominent in Acts; for a recent survey see Hays 2010.

<sup>42</sup> Acts mentions the reaction of some Jewish Christians to these developments, but also the fierce resistance of other Jews, when the Christians accepted Gentiles as Gentiles into the people of God. According to their understanding Israel's identity and privileges are relativised and compromised in this way, see Acts 12:1–23 and 21:27–24:9. Both passages appear at strategic places in the midst of accounts of the Gentile mission. The procedure and behaviour of the migrant part had severe implications for those who stayed behind.

*ment, Christian migrants through divine commission, divine equipment, divine guidance and divine affirmation play a significant role. Not only do Jews from the Jewish diaspora now belong to the church but also Gentiles who did not first become Jews as proselytes but remained Gentiles and were as such accepted into the community. In this process the church had to and did learn new things about her God, her Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Gentiles, about her own identity and her behaviour. In that sense there was a clear interaction and literal “feedback” between those who migrated and those who stayed behind (see Hanciles 2003:148). Experiences of migration have the potential for new experiences and insights; they offer challenges and opportunities for transformation.*

*In particular in view of the abiding ties with the community in Jerusalem, the Christian migrants in Acts are less “immigrants as individuals who uproot themselves from their home country to start a completely new life in a new land” (Hanciles 2003:148). Rather, they conform to*

the contemporary patterns of international migration would perhaps more helpfully be termed “transnational migration” or “transmigration”. This new paradigm suggests that even though migrants invest socially, economically, and politically in their new society, they may continue to participate in the daily life of the society from which they emigrated but which they did not abandon. Transmigrants are often bilingual, can lead dual lives, move easily between cultures, frequently maintain homes in two countries, and are incorporated as social actors in both (Hanciles 2003:148).

### 3. Reflection

What are we to make of the portrayal of the migrant church and its mission in Acts?<sup>43</sup> A few perspectives by an author from the global North have to suffice. The church has every responsibility to support and minister to those who for various reasons migrate, be it voluntarily or because they are forced to do so. This will entail, for example, provision of basic means, aids for integration (such as legal assistance and language courses) and pastoral care. The church will also have to use its influence (where existent) on governments at various levels and the population in areas to which migrants come to avoid and counter xenophobia. Due to a lack of resources and perhaps vision, this is where the church often stops, however

<sup>43</sup> In asking this question we obviously skip over almost two millennia of church history, in which migrations of all sorts played a major role. For a survey of developments and challenges up to 1960 see Hanciles 2008 and Walls 2002; for surveys of today's issues see Hanciles 2003 and Wan 2011.

invaluable this involvement proves to be. How do we gain a broader vision? What opportunities and new horizons does migration open up for the church today?

As in the Book of Acts, migration still brings Christians into areas and countries that hitherto have been closed to the traditional mission of the church. One example has to suffice. Due to the many domestic and other workers from the Philippines and elsewhere, there are more Christians than ever before in the wealthy countries of the Middle East. Despite their often hard fate, which often includes serious violations of human rights, they should be encouraged and instructed to proclaim the word from place to place (Acts 8:4).

One might add that migration also brings Christians from other continents (e.g. from Africa) to secular Europe. Up to now most migrant Christians have stayed together in their new environment in their own ethnic migrant communities and churches. In some cases the local churches have benefitted from migrant Christians; in other cases these migrants started to share their faith – vibrant, at times – with the wider population (see Hanciles 2009).

In addition, today migration (for economical and/or political reasons) brings people from countries with little or no Christian witness to places where they can easily be reached by the ministry of the church and the Gospel. Not only due to the recent influx of refugees from Syria, there are millions of non-Christians in Australia, Europe and North America today, who can now experience the witness of the church in word and deed.

Both situations require of the church vision, love, flexibility, determination and sensitivity in encouraging, praying and equipping its lay-people to use these opportunities wisely and with faith in the God who never only had his people/the church in mind, but who intends that the whole world be saved.

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