

## God Does Not Play Dice, but Does He Play Mahjong?

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“So what *do* you do then?” a zealous local employee at OMF’s headquarters in Singapore asked me a few years ago. She knew I was a member of OMF, then serving in the UK. But I was not a regional director or a mobiliser, or finance person or media specialist. So what else could I be?

When I described myself as a missionary she protested, “But you aren’t based in East Asia”. When I explained that I worked among East Asian students in the UK, and it was not health issues or aged parents that kept me in the West, I was able to introduce her to what OMF calls “Diaspora Ministry”.

For a mission with a geographical focus such as OMF, Diaspora Ministry (DM) is a newer effort targeting people from some of our target countries who live in our home nations rather than in Asia. Ministry focuses on those known to us who remain culturally and linguistically distinct, or who come from nations where political, religious, or even cultural norms bring restrictions on ministry. Some mission groups carry out DM among Japanese, for example, as they may be more open to the gospel while in the West than when they are at home.

In recent years the profile of Diaspora Ministry in OMF and other mission agencies has been raised and its value acknowledged. But in too many people’s minds, even among the informed and committed Christian public, DM remains somehow second-class, either a Cinderella yet to make it to the ball, or even a ministry ugly sister close to retirement. My wife and I served in DM for four years in the UK before moving to Asia in 2003. When we left home we saw an increase in financial and prayer support; in the eyes of at least some, getting on an aeroplane had made us ‘real missionaries’.

We retain our interest in DM and still meet church people here and in East Asia who feel that a person is only a missionary if they have left their own country. *Missio* seems to have more to do with being sent *to a country* than with being sent *with a message*.

A little biblical input may be helpful. If mission is the transmission of the Good News from the haves to the have-nots, then the locus of gospel ministry is the interface of *faith* and *no-faith*, or *faith* and *other-faith*. This will resonate with classic mission texts such as Matt 28:18-20 or Acts 1:8. There is much *going* in missions, but the core of God’s purpose is bringing people into the kingdom and discipling. Further, even the scope of Acts 1:8 includes ministry in a local context; you don’t *have* to go to the ends of the earth. Paul’s ministry combines reaching out to Jew and Gentile, and in the New Testament record we often encounter both in the same geographical context: without advocating an excessively narrow or prescriptive people group focus we can say that physical location was less significant than cross-cultural communication across a faith interface.

The same principle underlies God’s purposes for His people in the Old Testament context. Chris Wright talks about Israel representing God on earth through worship and distinctive ethics which manifest His character. While there is no explicit *go*

*mandate* in the OT law, one purpose of God's blueprint was that Israelite society would attract outsiders and make Yahweh known to them. Such a notion is expressed clearly in the instructions to take care of foreigners within Israel. Lev 19:10 requires God's people to leave some of the grape harvest for the poor or the alien, and Lev 23:22 makes a similar prescription about grain harvesting. Simply put, if NT commands us to *go out*, then the OT seeks a society which invites people to *come in*. The outworking of this older principle can be seen for a number of OT characters, Ruth perhaps constituting the best example: "Your people will be my people and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16b). The overall thrust of the Bible's teaching is thus a proclamation of the message to those who have yet to hear and respond, accompanied by genuine social care and concern for aliens who have come to live within the physical locus of the community of faith. God says "If there are people in your midst who don't know me, take care of them and tell them about me". That's *missio*.

So what of dice and mahjong? In response to developments in quantum mechanics Einstein complained that God does not play dice – the universe's physical functioning is not based on chance. Neither is its missiological functioning. A few years ago an OMF colleague and I were discussing the increasing numbers of Mainland Chinese who live abroad. With horizontal, rotary, sweeping motions of both hands, he told me "God is washing the (mahjong) tiles". Mahjong is the classic Chinese game similar to a combination of playing cards and dominoes, in which the tiles are shuffled or *washed* after each game. From this we derived the term *mahjong theology* to advocate DM. In His sovereignty, today God is shuffling the pack, and washing people from various ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds all over the planet. Just as God washed Ruth and Rahab into the community of faith, so now He is washing Chinese to the UK, for example. This is nothing new; Acts 17:26-27 tell us that God *made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.*

For us, the migration phenomenon of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century ties together the Great Commission with the ethics of God-fearing community, and an acknowledgement of God's sovereignty in the affairs of men and women. Indeed, Christian ministry among migrants has been described as Acts 1:8 *in reverse*; God is bringing people from the ends of the earth right to our street. We are to respond to this challenge right where we live.

Some may perceive migration as a menace, but as citizens and Christians we should view it as ministry opportunity. Unprecedented numbers of people are on the move, looking for safety, freedom, or just a better life. The expansion of the EU and ASEAN, improved communication, and ever-cheaper travel have all shrunk our world. At the same time, poverty, conflict, and hardship in many regions have caused millions to cross borders to richer, more stable nations.

Migrants are often creative, proactive people looking for a better life. There is much anecdotal evidence that migrants are more open to new things than those who remain at home. Yet the same people are vulnerable and needy. Before leaving China, one student was told by non-believing relatives, "If you need help in Britain, go to a church. They will look after you". Our own Diaspora ministry showed us that

while apologetics and Bible study were important, the vital factor in the journey to faith was God's love manifest through His people, across a faith – non-faith interface.

Many foreigners in our midst stay long-term, while others return home after a college course or when they have gained money or work experience. The shrinking world which brought them to us may well take them away again. Improved communications and cheaper transport mean that traditional distinctions between overseas mission and student ministry are becoming blurred. These days UK-based Christians can easily travel overseas and follow up those who have returned home, or keep in touch through email and skype. Increasingly, we can view DM and overseas mission as two ends of a continuum. The exact nature of the continuum depends on the home country of the migrants. Where there is a restrictive regime or religion, maintaining contact or visiting may be difficult. Communicating across cultures always presents problems, and Christians in the West need to work with colleagues 'on the field' to gain useful insights and resource materials. For some peoples, open societies such as ours facilitate ministry which could not be undertaken in their home countries.

Migration exists within God's providence and promotes His purposes. To engage in challenging, highly significant cross-cultural ministry no longer needs hours on an aeroplane; just open your front door! God is washing the mahjong tiles and moving men and women around the planet. The presence of foreign migrants on our shores is a God-given opportunity which should be grasped. Diaspora Ministry is cross-cultural mission in the fullest sense and needs churches to provide people, prayer, and finance. Mission agencies need to advocate DM and actively recruit for it. Acts 1:8 paraphrased for Diaspora Ministry might read: *You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses to people from the ends of the earth, from Samaria and from all Judea; and you will do this right home here in Jerusalem.*

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