WHO IS MY NEIGHBOUR?
THE GLOBAL AND PERSONAL CHALLENGE

Edited by **Richard Carter** and **Samuel Wells**

Contributions by Sarah Coakley, Brendan Cox, Stanley Hauerwas, Justin Welby, Rowan Williams and others

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Cover images

The cover images are taken from *The Stations*, by Marksteen Adamson.

The Stations traces the emotional journey of refugees, provoking reflection and daring response. Drawing on the emotional suffering represented by the traditional 14 'Stations of the Cross', it encapsulates the experiences and stories of refugees as they embark on a harrowing emotional as well as geographical journey.

The Stations reinterprets an ancient series of images which have spoken for centuries to those who have experienced pain and desolation. Christ's journey of suffering is a universal one, played out in the suffering of people from different faith backgrounds, captured through stories and pictures of a modern humanitarian crisis. Marksteen Adamson spent a lot of time in the Calais Jungle camp and travelled to Beqaa Valley (on the border of Syria) in Lebanon to find the source of the refugee crisis, and to discover and document the individual stories he heard, which eventually informed this project.

The two images on the cover of this book are part of a touring exhibition which was launched at St Martin-in-the-Fields (see <http://thestations.org.uk/>).

Front cover: A kiss of peace between playmates in a camp for Syrian refugees.

Back cover: A young man stands at the border fence of the Jungle looking at the trucks as they go on their way to the port and on to the UK.

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SPCK

First published in Great Britain in 2018

Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
36 Causton Street
London SW1P 4ST
www.spck.org.uk

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978–0–281–07840–0
eBook ISBN 978–0–281–07841–7

Typeset by Manila Typesetting Company
First printed in Great Britain by Ashford Colour Press
Subsequently digitally reprinted in Great Britain

eBook by Manila Typesetting Company

Produced on paper from sustainable forests

For members of the
Sunday International Group
at St Martin-in-the-Fields

Contents

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Preface

This is a book about migration. But because it's about migration it's about cross-cultural relationships, fear, discovery, surprises, politics and faith. Which are what the Bible is about. So it turns out to be a book about the renewal of Christianity and the Church in the face of what seems to be a crisis but might turn out to be a gift. Or many millions of gifts.

St Martin-in-the-Fields is located at the point of the highest density of homeless people in Europe (5 per cent of those who sleep outside in Britain bed down on the Strand). We are experiencing extraordinary movements of people, movements that reflect the political, climatic, social and economic changes affecting our continent and world. In the autumn of 2016 St Martin's hosted a series of lectures entitled 'Who is My Neighbour? The Ethics of Global Relationships'. The chapters in this book arose out of those lectures and from conversations that accompanied and were related to them. We are grateful to members of the Education Group and many other supportive heads, hands and hearts at St Martin-in-the-Fields who made those lectures such wonderful events.

We invited a mixture of academics, practitioners, politicians, clergy and active citizens to contribute to this book.

We are glad of the diversity of background, perception and style of writing that the completed volume represents.

We are especially grateful to Canterbury Press and to Church Publishing for kind permission to include the chapter 'Remember you were a stranger', which was previously published as 'Migration' in Samuel Wells, *How Then Shall We Live? Christian Engagement with Contemporary Issues* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2016/New York: Church Publishing, 2017); and to Eerdmans and again to Canterbury Press for kind permission to publish the chapter 'My neighbour, God's gift', a different form of which was previously published as 'Being with the neighbour' in Samuel Wells, *Incarnational Mission: Being with the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans/Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2018). Anna Rowlands' chapter first appeared at <www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2016/06/29/4491205.htm>.

The book is dedicated to several dozen remarkable and brave people who have for the last five years now been involved in our Sunday International Group and whose stories, if ever fully told, would move, inspire and humble all who heard them and would surely transform the public discourse around the stranger.

Prologue: Remember you were a stranger

Samuel Wells

There's perhaps no issue today where the Church's understanding of God and the momentum of public opinion are as far apart as they are on immigration. I want to explore how this demanding issue can be a source of renewal for Church and nation.

Around 230 million people, more than 3 per cent of the world's population, are currently migrants. About one-fifth of that number have travelled beyond their region of origin. There are different names for migrants: those who choose or are forced to flee from desperate situations and request settlement in a new country we call asylum seekers; those who are accepted in the new country we call refugees; those who are forced out of a country but aren't in an application process we call displaced persons; those whose applications aren't accepted we call failed asylum seekers; those who are simply seeking a better life, sometimes in the face of destitution, we usually call economic migrants. Often these distinctions break down. In general, migrants are driven by political or economic aspiration – or more often desperation.

Such desperation is increasing for a number of reasons. The political reasons mostly concern war and persecution: unrest or oppression in Syria, Eritrea, Zimbabwe, Colombia,

Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo and Somalia, some of it exacerbated by the end of the Cold War, has generated a huge number of refugees. Economic factors include poverty, environmental crisis, and the inequalities exacerbated by globalization; economic considerations also affect those drawn to the West for better work and welfare prospects. Meanwhile the expansion of the European Union has created an ambiguity in Europe about what is regarded as migration. Social dimensions involve the presence of relatives already based elsewhere and the emergence of an industry of trafficking and smuggling.

This significant displacement of populations is at root the fallout of the global political and economic system. Western governments retain their electoral legitimacy by preserving a global climate of trade and security. But that global climate has casualties. Migrants are the flotsam and jetsam of the ocean wave of global power. And the perceived crisis over migration arises from the assumption of Western governments and populations that the only way to deal with the symptoms of this global fallout is to shoo people away as much as possible for as long as possible.

Since September 11, 2001 there's been a lurking fear that somehow the most antagonized citizens of the Global South are poised to take revenge on the West for its real or perceived neocolonial sins. The paradox of the migration issue is that, in the Western popular imagination, migrants, in other words those most hurt by and vulnerable to the shortcomings of their countries of origin, become the visible embodiment of these terrifying risks that seem to have no limits or borders; and when that small minority of migrants

actually make it through the system and are settled, for example, in the UK, they can find themselves side by side with hurt and vulnerable people in some of the most challenging neighbourhoods in the country. Thus the anxieties of both incoming and host populations are almost inevitably exacerbated and the issue becomes more fraught than it might otherwise be.

Before we go any further, let's identify and dispel a few influential but inaccurate myths about migration. Neither Britain nor the USA is, or ever has been, a pure nation of a single race or religion, of everlasting regional and class harmony. Their respective borders have long been debated and permeable and they have always been a mongrel people of diverse origins. At the same time, migration is invariably a matter of mixed motives. If economic drivers were the only issue, people all over the world would be on the move all the time; yet for most people habit and familiarity and family and local networks far outweigh simple economic improvement. On the other hand, there's nothing wrong with someone who's not persecuted seeking to better themselves economically in a new country. A great many of this nation's most dynamic leaders and shapers have been immigrants or children of immigrants; for America, such a story is part of the 'founding myth' of the nation.

There isn't a simple answer to the displacement of populations. The UK and USA have much in terms of skills, culture and dynamism to gain from an influx of resourceful and community-minded new citizens – not least to rectify the imbalance of age-bands between working and retired populations. But large-scale assimilation is demanding for

all concerned. It's no use naively maintaining that the government should simply remove all border controls. One unplanned side effect of such action would be to encourage oppressive regimes to feel that they could simply export their opponents to the West. The so-called IS would be delighted to do that right now.

Likewise it's not that all fears expressed among local host populations are unreasonable. There's widespread resentment that asylum seekers displace host residents in what sometimes seems a tight competition for housing, jobs, benefits and healthcare. Once again migrants become the flashpoint of existing social tensions about taxation and welfare provision and shortage of housing. The tensions are real, and the presence of asylum seekers exacerbates those tensions. But the myth is that migration is really the issue. The truth is that the tensions would be there without the asylum seekers, and the anxieties wouldn't go away if the asylum seekers went away. Those who have commercial and political capital to make out of scapegoating the stranger and fomenting a climate of fear set about fanning such anxieties even in neighbourhoods where they are groundless. A modest influx of migrants certainly changes a culture; but culture has always been changing and there's no evidence that migrants change culture for the worse by any of the conventional evaluative yardsticks.

When it comes to the churches' existing response to immigration, there are some very good things to be said and one difficult thing. The very good things are a wide range of initiatives that receive the stranger as a gift and look for the face of Christ in those that are hungry and naked and in

many cases more or less in prison. Many projects offer welcome, hospitality, companionship and support; some give advice, or practical help such as clothing, food parcels, nappies and cash. Some advocate around immigration policy on a national level, seek to change attitudes more locally, or take up the cause of individuals who have had their cases neglected or rejected. And many churches have found migrants joining their congregations and enriching their liturgies and educational programmes and deepening their understanding of scriptural stories like those of the itinerant Abraham and the refugee Hagar. All these dimensions are part of our experience at my own church, St Martin's, too. The difficult thing to say is that the churches seem no closer than anyone else to being able to articulate a humane and sustainable immigration policy of which Church and nation may be proud rather than ashamed. In the absence of such a proposal, valuable church initiatives are like absorbing episodes in a drama with no overall narrative.

How might we begin to put such a proposal together? For Christians the place to begin is to alter the perception that being a migrant is something unusual or unnatural. Jesus is a displaced person in three senses. Fundamentally, he is the heavenly one who sojourned on earth. And it didn't go well: as John's Gospel puts it, 'He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him' (John 1.11). Then he finds himself a refugee in Egypt, his parents fleeing Herod's persecution. Third, he spends his ministry as an itinerant preacher and healer, with nowhere to lay his head. Meanwhile the story of Israel is one of migration from beginning to end. Adam and Eve leave the Garden; Noah and family sail away from destruction; Abraham follows God's call; Joseph

and family head down to Egypt; Moses leads the people back; Judah is taken into exile in Babylon; Ezra and Nehemiah tell of the return. None of these people were going on a package holiday: they were refugees, asylum seekers, or trafficked persons. There is precisely one verse commanding the children of Israel, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'; there are no fewer than 36 verses saying 'love the stranger': care of the alien is how Israel remembers its history with gratitude.[1]

What this is telling us is that being displaced is an integral part of the whole story of the Bible, an inherent part of being God's people. Over and again we're shown lessons the people of God would never have learnt without their displacements. Israel was formed by 40 years in the wilderness and was renewed by 50 years in exile. There's no Old Testament without migration. In the New Testament, the Acts of the Apostles in general and the ministry of Paul in particular comprise one journey after another. And ultimately, as the book of Revelation makes clear, we're all in exile from our true and final abode in heaven. The sooner we realize that here we have no abiding city and that we're strangers and pilgrims on earth, the better we'll grasp the gospel. We're all travellers, like it or not. Christians can never blandly talk of migrants as 'them' and host populations as 'us'. To be a Christian is to be en route. Christians have a citizenship, but it's not situated right here.

Let me focus down on one particular migrant we may take as representative of the whole story. The crucial point about the story of Ruth is that the needy migrant becomes the source of national renewal.[2] This tiny story, almost entirely

made up of dialogue, epitomizes the journey about immigration we need to make today. The backdrop is of political and environmental crisis in Israel during the time of the judges: the rule of law had been practically abandoned, and famine menaced the land. The people of Israel were sworn enemies of the Moabites, because the Moabites were seen as the fruit of incest between Lot and his daughters, and because they had refused to help Moses and his people when they themselves were strangers in the wilderness. Around 15 times in four chapters we're told that Ruth is a foreigner or a Moabitess. Ruth is like an archetypal asylum seeker today: a sexually dangerous woman from a suspicious country with a foreign religion bringing a basketload of trouble. It turns out that she is the bringer of salvation: her son Obed is set to become the grandfather of David, Israel's greatest king.

The story hinges on two face-to-face relationships: the sympathy between the Israelite widow Naomi and her daughter-in-law the Moabite widow Ruth, and the reciprocity between the same Moabitess Ruth and the wealthy but childless kinsman Boaz. Ruth faces isolation as a foreign widow amid a famine; she's vulnerable to being molested in the barley field and begins the story facing humiliation and death. But she pledges her loyalty to Naomi, now and for ever, and she matches her impoverishment with Boaz's resources, his lack of an heir with her youth and attractiveness, his dilatory paralysis with her initiative and energy, her neediness with his ability to navigate the legal niceties in her favour.

There's no need to be sentimental about Ruth's story. She faces a terrible crisis as the story begins. It's not necessary

to portray her simply as a pious, devoted daughter-in-law who discovers an influential kinsman and patron, and makes him her husband. She uses guile and seduction to achieve what her lowly social status would never have given her. But we also have to recognize what she gives up. In becoming an Israelite, taking on her mother-in-law's family, language, town and religion, she takes the path of total assimilation. If we think about migrants today, host cultures shouldn't be pious and assume that all asylum seekers will be guileless and innocent; but neither may a host culture assert its customs so strongly that it demands every migrant adopts those traditions from the word go.

But just as much as we shouldn't overplay Ruth as a model of the perfect asylum seeker, so we mustn't miss the depth of her story. She sticks with Naomi through thick and thin. Boaz shapes his life to redeem her, and in doing so finds a blessing. Together Ruth and Boaz portray for us the faithfulness of God. This is how God works, with steadfast love, at personal cost, facing adversity, never letting us go, sometimes using guile, sometimes shrewdness, always disarming us with goodness and constantly pointing to a purpose beyond what we can yet see. Ruth is Jesus, who goes into the far country and becomes one like us and brings about our salvation; but Boaz is also Jesus, for, like Jesus, Boaz takes on his shoulders the troubles of one he doesn't need to help and brings deliverance at great cost to himself.

Now this brings us to the central point. The issue of immigration is conventionally discussed as a question of duty. The issue is whether Britain is obliged to take in people who are fleeing persecution elsewhere, how one can verify that

the claim is genuine, whether one has to limit the number even of the persecuted, and whether anyone migrating largely for economic benefit has any right to be here. What Ruth's story shows is that the foreigner who appears to be nothing more than a bundle of trouble turns out to bring vital initiative and energy, and ultimately becomes the harbinger of the nation's hope of renewal. And what Ruth evokes in the host country is to stir in Boaz an awareness of his own scarcity and to inspire him to actions that write his place in salvation history. To turn our back on migrants is to forget our identity, inhibit our renewal and deny our destiny.

I'm not saying we should take away border controls and dismantle quota policies. But I am saying it's time to change our framework for this whole conversation. Migrants are not fundamentally a threat and a danger. They are first and foremost a challenge to the Church to reinhabit its true identity and a gift to the nation to rediscover its lost energy. You can have too much of a good thing: but immigrants are fundamentally a good thing. We're all migrants, or the sons and daughters thereof; Jesus was a migrant too. To forget that is to forget who we are and to forget who God is.

And the reason I have a particular care for this issue is that I am a migrant. I was born in Canada, was brought to the UK as a baby, and as an adult I left to make a life in the USA. I migrated back to the UK a few years ago. On each occasion I was welcomed as a stranger and seen as a blessing, a source of hope and renewal. And most importantly, in 1938 my mother came to this country as an asylum seeker. The danger she escaped was real: she left Berlin just in time. She learnt a new language and new customs in a foreign land. In time

she found her Boaz. And that's how I came to be here today. I can't avoid the conclusion that if Britain had had the same attitude and policy towards asylum seekers then that it has today, I would never have been born.

And, by the way, I didn't mention my mother's name. She was called Ruth.

Notes

1 See Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 58.

2 For the idea of citing Ruth and for much of what follows, I am grateful to Susannah Snyder, *Asylum-Seeking, Migration and Church* (London: Ashgate, 2012).