



Mission and the Margins in Contemporary Europe

Mission in Europe cannot be properly understood – or responsibly carried out – without reference to the margins of European societies and those who find themselves there. Just as Jesus’ mission was “at, with and from the margins... the church’s mission cannot be otherwise.”¹

For Jesus this meant spending time with women, children, gentiles, lepers, the poor and others who were excluded by his contemporaries. We are duty-bound to ask questions about equivalent groups in Europe today: who is marginalised, from what, and how? And what should be our response to such marginalisation? But we also need to ask searching questions about our own locatedness

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(centre or margin?) – and what those on the margins may be teaching us.

The English language abounds with forceful words for those who have been described as “from the underside of history, from the outskirts of society, from among the oppressed masses”²: these are the downtrodden, the ostracized, the dehumanized, the subjugated, the alienated, the stigmatized and the disenfranchised. The common thread being a denial of the right to participate fully or equally in society; being “far removed from decision-making processes.”³

Some European Christians complain that secularisation has seen the church itself being marginalised but loss of power and

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EDITORIAL

The Potential of the Margin

In ‘How the Irish saved Civilization’, Thomas Cahill tells how the Gospel transformed a wild outpost on the margins of the Roman Empire into a land of ‘saints and scholars’. The Irish church kept the story of the Gospel alive as the Empire disintegrated, and the Celtic ‘White Monks’ would one day in turn, bring back to Europe the learning lost after the fall of Rome. Over half of all biblical commentaries written between 650 and 850 were by Irishmen, and Irish missionaries reached as far as Moldova by the end of the eighth century.

This edition of Vista explores some of the margins where mission in Europe is taking place, out of the limelight and away from the centres of ‘power’, just as Ireland was sixteen centuries ago.

The stories we feature are small, local and personal; a tiny proportion of what is happening. Each focuses on a specific group of people at the edge of society, whether the Roma in Bulgaria and the UK, girls trafficked for sex in France, asylum seekers and refugees in Gloucester or the LGBT community, And as Rik Lubbers’ article highlights, for many of us, just being a Christian in Europe means you are automatically on the ‘margin’.

A margin is also a ‘liminal space’ where there is a sense of stepping beyond the known and certain. As editors we recognise that some of the margins explored by the writers in this issue of Vista may step beyond what you are comfortable with, both missiologically and theologically. We offer them to you for reflection and consideration.

Joanne Appleton

influence is not necessarily the same thing as finding oneself on the margins. Rather, in this article we consider three different types of marginalisation – which are not to be understood primarily as geographical or physical but social.

There are those who are marginalised on the basis of their **ethnicity, race or religion**, whether Roma or evangelical Christians in some countries, or victims of centuries-old prejudices and discrimination. Such marginalisation may be institutionalised, legalised or legitimized by state approval (or tacitly endorsed by, for example, state churches).

Secondly, there are those who are marginalised because of their **social and economic status**: the homeless, unemployed, lower social classes, prisoners and others who face limited opportunities as impersonal but powerful forces work to exclude them from fully participating in society. Refugees and asylum seekers and those who are trafficked also fall into this category: often socially marginalised and, sometimes barred altogether from ‘Fortress Europe’.

A third type of marginalised people are those who are rejected, dominated or ‘dis-privileged’ because of their **identity**: women, young people, the elderly, the disabled, those not conforming to heterosexual ‘norms’. Across Europe, different states have made different levels of progress in terms of social inclusivity and acceptance, with some lagging behind considerably.

All three forms of marginalisation describe situations where those *with* power and influence use it (whether intentionally or not) to control, impair or harm those with less (or no) power and influence. That is to say, marginalisation has its roots in human selfishness, power lust and, ultimately, sinfulness. It is a complex phenomenon and varies from context to context; a person who is marginalised in one setting may be someone who excludes or marginalises others in a different context.



Image: irelandtodaynews.com

Our response

How can European churches and Christians respond? There are at least four necessary responses.

Firstly, oppressive powers – and that includes those of marginalisation – must be identified and denounced. This is part of the church’s prophetic role in society, and such denunciation may bring us into conflict with elites and those benefiting from the status quo. In some countries such as the UK there are many precedents for such condemnation; in others countries, churches may need to take bolder steps to confront injustice and inequality.

Secondly, the church itself must practise a “radical inclusiveness”⁴ that simply refuses to perpetuate us/other divisions, fundamentally challenging the concept of core/margin thinking: all are to be welcomed, all are to be invited, and the need for genuine Christian hospitality has never been greater in European churches.

Thirdly, those who have been marginalised “should not be seen as only recipients... but as actors in mission.”⁵ The marginalised are to be equal participants not only in society but in terms of participating in God’s mission too. Some would go further and argue that marginalised people are the “main partners” in God’s mission.⁶ What could we learn from such sisters and brothers? As the World Council of

Church statement *Together Towards Life* reminds us, on the margins it is often possible to see what is out of view from the centre.⁷

And finally, some hard questions need to be faced by European Christians, especially given our continent’s long history of imperialism and colonialism: how have our lives, our churches, our theology, even our missiology, served

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our own interests and excluded or marginalised others? To what extent are we complicit in others being marginalised? Have our actions (or inaction) led to other

groups or individuals being kept out – of our countries, our parliaments, our universities, our workforce, our churches.

When we marginalise

It is important for churches in Europe to be alert to the possibility of marginalisation wherever there may be imbalances of power. Three examples will illustrate the point.

Firstly, Harvey Kwiyani has sensitively raised the question of whether non-Western missionaries are being marginalised in the West, including Europe.⁸ The danger being that Western attitudes, assumptions and unacknowledged prejudices may lead to non-Western missionaries being seen as inferior to Westerners; or seen as equal but lacking equivalent resources and influence and being disregarded as a result.

Secondly, at missions conferences, training colleges and so on, are minority European voices being heard? Do Eastern Europeans have as much influence as Western Europeans in these circumstances? We need to reconsider who is setting the agenda for European mission.

And thirdly, are some missiologies or missiological approaches themselves being marginalized within Europe – whether liberationist, feminist, Pentecostal (or non-Pentecostals) or other? So even within missionary and missiological circles, we may find marginalisation occurring.

Where does this leave us? Ironically, there has been talk in recent years of Europe itself being marginalised, as other countries, including China and India, develop economically and assert themselves politically.

But whatever the international status of Europe, its churches and its Christians would do well to simply follow the example of Jesus Christ and his approach to power and to those isolated or excluded by it: the Jesus who ministered to the poor, the sick, the maligned and the oppressed, and challenged his disciples to do likewise; the Jesus who died among the despised, rejected and forsaken; the risen Lord who sent – and continues to send – his followers “to the margins (ends) of the earth” that all might be invited in.

Chris Ducker is Lecturer in Mission at Redcliffe College, Gloucester.

Endnotes

1. Joseph Prabhakar Dayam, “Postscript: Mission at, with and from the margins – A missiology of the cross” in Jesudason et al (eds., 2014) *Mission At and From the Margins: Patterns, Protagonists and Perspectives* (Oxford: Regnum Books), p.262.

2. Miguel de la Torre (2014) *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins*, 2nd edition (Maryknoll: Orbis).

3. Genevieve Mwayuli and Misia Kadenyi (2009) “Environmental Justice for Peace and Development: A Biblical Perspective”, *African Ecclesial Review* 51:4, p.533.

4. Matthias Wenk (2009) “Reconciliation and Renunciation of Status as God’s final aim for Humanity: New Testament Thoughts on the Church’s Mission and Unity”, p.5. Wenk notes that this radical inclusiveness “also prompted conflict and schism with those that did not share his vision.”

5. Emma Wild-Wood and Peniel Rajkumar (eds., 2013) *Foundations for Mission* (Oxford: Regnum Books), p.240.

6. WCC (2012) *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*, p.107.

7. *Ibid*, p38.

8. Harvey Kwiyani (2012) “Power in Mission,” *Journal of Mission Practice* No.2, Autumn 2012.

REACHING THE ROMA

There is a bus which runs directly from a small Roma Hamlet in NE Slovakia to Sheffield. When Slovakia became part of the EU in 2007, many Slovakian Roma travelled on this bus and settled in estates in the north of Sheffield, UK.

As the number of Roma grew, so did tensions in the city. Stories of

increased theft, litter-strewn streets and ghettoisation started to appear in newspapers. In 2015 there were fights in the streets, particularly between the Roma and Pakistani residents.

Whilst tensions have decreased in the city, any mention of the Roma generally brings frowns along with stories of disrespectful, system-abusing, unwanted

immigrants.

Marginalisation of the Roma - the largest ethnic minority in the EU, is nothing new. Efforts to improve integration have met with limited success, with one in three Roma in the EU experiencing some form of harassment, with 4% being physical violence. (Fundamental Rights report 2018, European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights)

Lack of education, employment opportunities and poor social skills contribute to their social exclusion. The 2016 European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey of nine member states found that 80 % still live at risk of poverty. Moreover, an average of 27 % of Roma live in households where at least one person had to go to bed hungry at least once in the previous month; in some EU Member States, this proportion is even higher.

In addressing some of the need, there are many ministries reaching out to the Roma across Europe - this article highlights just two.

Mission Possible in Bulgaria (mp.org/where-we-work/bulgaria) started running



A Baby Box is given to a Roma family by the Bulgarian Mission Possible team

soup kitchens and classes for children in Roma villages and hamlets in 1998. In addition, they give 'Baby Boxes' to families with newborn children, which contain donated essentials such as clothes and nappies.

Roma girls are married young and many become mothers between ages 13 and 15. They don't receive instruction and lack medical care. So alongside the Baby Boxes, the Mission Possible staff hold classes for the mothers giving them teaching, health care, and mental and spiritual help and support.

The spiritual aspect is important, and in several Roma villages, churches have also been planted as part of Mission Possible's work.

Back in Sheffield, a small missional community linked to a local church is reaching out to the Slovakian Roma living in one of the estates.

"Many Roma already know Jesus - one of the first things you'll hear out of their mouths when you truly start to get to know them is 'I love Jesus'," explains Sarah who has been part of the group since mid-2017. 'But we want that they might truly encounter the living God and to cultivate a spirit of worship among the children.'

The group is currently in touch with over 100 children and their families (with families typically having up to 10 children). Due to the nature of migration in Sheffield, most of the

Roma are related to each other in some way, and homes are always open with children moving freely from one to another. Sarah reports that it is hard to walk up the street without being stopped by 10 different children, all eager for conversation. "In such large families, children are often hungry for attention and time - which is something we can give them," she says.

"Part of our mission is house visits. When visiting a new family, it often takes no more than a knock on the door and saying 'Hi, we're neighbours, can we be friends' to be let into their house, offered food, coffee and friendship. We listen to the adults as

they express concerns or worries, helping them to decipher letters, finances, doctor appointments, as many adults have limited

English and literacy. We often end by reading the Bible together, praying and singing to Jesus, which they love."

The group also do discipleship classes with older teenagers, and a highlight of the week is the Jesus party (so-called by the children) where they all share food together, have a short sketch or talk, and then singing and dancing, with the children often making up their own songs of praise.

"We have also started doing homework with the children," says Sarah. "Many struggle in schools. Their chaotic home lives mean that they are not able to adapt well to the rigid

school environment, and most of them before coming to England will have very limited experience of school. In Slovakia, the Roma are not allowed in normal schools, and instead attend special schools - or none at all. As a result, children are not used to rules or sitting still, and the exclusion rate is disproportionately high.

Their parents' lack of English means they often can't get help with their homework, even if they want it. Often during home visits, children are keen to practice reading or maths, or show us with pride a class test they have passed.

"But the children and families are also extremely vulnerable. Grooming is an issue. Alcoholism is a problem in some families. They are often very poor, exploited by landlords and employers and unable to access legal aid.

"Even so, we are seeing lives transformed. Children who a year ago had little respect for authority, and who we struggled to engage with are now kind and respectful. They listen, are polite and don't fight.

"The Roma are so eager to and ready to love, and deserving of our love, if only we are willing to put aside cultural barriers and see them as Jesus does. They are a beautiful people and we just need to open our eyes to see it."

Jo & Sarah Appleton

For more information about mission among the Roma visit romanetworks.org

We want that the Roma might truly encounter the living God and to cultivate a spirit of worship



The Roma are one of the network tracks featured in the EEA 'Hope for Europe' conference in Tallinn from 8-13 October 2018.

Other tracks include: Arts, Cities, Children's Ministry, Christian Educators, Disability, Economics, Stewardship and Generosity, Evangelism in a New Age, European Freedom Network, Healthcare, Media and Communication, Missions, Muslim Ministries, Peace and Reconciliation and Refugee Ministries.

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'Christianity as default is gone: the rise of a non-Christian Europe', was the title above a recent article.¹

We see this kind of message in publications with some regularity, but it struck me that this research was all about young people aged 16-29. I asked myself, a bit skeptically, 'what will the future church look like?' I can imagine from a Christian perspective, this is often exactly how the decrease of Christianity is seen. It feels painful and we feel skeptical. What will the church be in the future?

But then, in the same article, another sentence struck me: 'In 20 or 30 years' time, mainstream churches will be smaller, but the few people left will be highly committed.'² Small in number, but highly committed. The church in the margin, as minority, but faithful present in the society. The aspect of Christian alienation might help us to understand the decreasing position of the church in a more healthy and positive way.

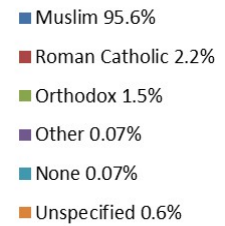
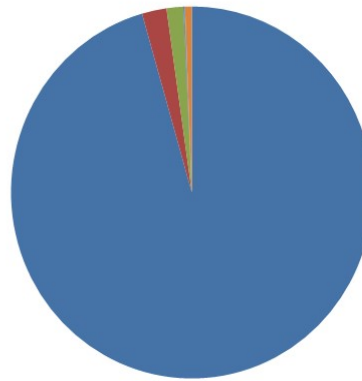
In this article we will look at 1 Peter 1:1 and at the Protestant-Evangelical movement in Kosovo. This church exists in the context of Islam, and has already been in the margins for decades.³

In the beginning of 1 Peter we see the author of the document calls his readers: 'God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered'. (NIV) There are three elements in this verse which relate to Christian alienation: Identity, Estrangement and being Scattered. I will describe each and include some modest comments related to the church of Kosovo to give us possibly a more optimistic and hopeful view on the future of the Christian movement in the margins.⁴

Identity of the Christian movement

Why are Christians alienated on earth? It seems logical to say that this is a consequence of being Christian. But, in my humble opinion, it is often seen as an unintended – and even maybe unwanted – consequence. It might have negative associations. We do not long

Religious demographics in Kosovo (2011 est)



for Christian alienation. But in 1 Peter 1 Christian alienation is related to God's sovereign love. The author speaks about God's election and this makes the church a movement of strangers. Because of God's sovereign love he has chosen the movement of Christians as His representatives on earth.⁵ So, if this is the case, Christian alienation is not, by definition, a negative consequence of being Christian or an unintentional aspect of Christian life. No, it is just a

In Kosovo there are no Christian political movements, no Christian lobby and no big churches

positive consequence of being chosen and intentional in nature. This is a radical other perspective which might be often overseen.

This consideration can be helpful for churches in the margins. In Kosovo for example, Christians have to face social persecution.⁶ There is tension within their families because they become Christians. Gossip, insults and disdain occur regularly. But, despite these difficulties which I don't want to downplay, they may see that alienation, with all the challenges and difficulties, is intentional and a consequence of being chosen through godly love. That's why Paul said: 'You are no longer foreigners (...), but fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household (...) with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.'⁷ Such a clear identity gives a great comfort in all circumstances for the church in Kosovo as well for all churches all over the world.

Estrangement

The author of 1 Peter speaks about 'strangers'. What does this mean?

First of all: believers are mentioned as strangers in this world. This because of their calling to live a holy, i.e. distinct, life.⁸ This holiness makes them different from their environment, because of their identity, because of their calling to live a holy life.

This difference is twofold in nature. 1) Christians feel themselves different in their own environment. This gives an inner estrangement to a non-Christian context. But the distinction also works the other way around: 2) The non-Christian context sees Christians as strange because they have other convictions and they behave differently. The latter one is an external perspective.

In relation to the external perspective Christians in Kosovo are often seen as foolish and even as traitors. This has to do with historical tensions between Serbs and Albanians. Kosovar Albanians know that Serbs are (Orthodox) Christians. From their perspective, the Christian Serbs killed and raped a lot of Albanians during the war at the end of the 90's.⁹

With regard to the inner perspective Christians do face the fact that they have to behave differently. On the one hand they keep some distance and on the other hand they try to reach to their own people. This paradoxical attitude, inspired by the notion of Christian alienation, raises the question of how to protect the churches' identity and at the same time try to be of value within the public sphere? Christians have to live their lives in the seemingly contradictory

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position of neither distance nor assimilation. Alienated but as seed in their environment.

Scattered

According to I Peter, Christians are apparently scattered in their non-Christian environment. This translation emphasizes the notion of being a minority or at the margin of a society. A movement which is scattered has no religious or political power. In Greek the term 'diaspora' is used. This also reminds us about the exile experience of the people of Israel during the Old Testament. What was one of the characteristics of the exile? Longing for their home, Canaan.

So, somehow Christians have a kind of diaspora experience.¹⁰ They are longing for their home country,¹¹ the eschatological reality with God, and powerless in the earthly reality.

In Kosovo there is no Christian political movement, no Christian lobby, no big churches. In Kosovo we have only Christians who live their lives and share their hope within their families, within their villages. They share their hope for a future reality, but also hope for their country in this earthly reality. There is

no room for any kind of escapism. And just in this paradoxical engagement they live their godly missional lives.

Godly lives, in the margin, in a non-Christian society. And from the margins Christians try to live in the midst of their (non-Christian) neighbors. Not as victims, but as victors, as chosen people. Alienated on earth, but not alienated before God.

I know; Christianity as default is gone, but I see the rise of a church in the margin in a non-Christian Europe. Right there where God called the church to be.

Rik and Matched Lubbers are ECM missionaries who have worked in Kosovo since 2013.

Endnotes

1. Sherwood, H., 'Christianity as default is gone: the rise of a non-Christian Europe' in: The Guardian, 21 March 2018. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/21/christianity-non-christian-europe-young-people-survey-religion> (Last consulted on 4-6-2018) Compare also: Bullivant, S., Europe's Young Adults and Religion: Findings from the European Social Survey (2014-16) to inform the 2018 Synod of Bishops (London: St. Mary's University, 2018)

2. Ibid

3. Because of the given space I cannot work out all the Bible passages related to 'Christian alienation'. I chose the first letter of Peter because it is just this letter that turns a marginal indication of Christian alienation to a more prominent quality of the church. Cf. e.g. Gen. 23:4; Ps. 38:13 [LXX: 39:12] and Hebr. 11:13. At the same time we recognize that this designation of the Christian movement never had a central place in the NT. It is just one of the designations for the church.

4. Christian alienation contains a lot more, but for this contribution I have to limit myself.

5.. 2 Cor. 5:20. We deliberately use the terms 'church' and 'Christian movement' alternately to emphasize the church as collective.

6.. With social persecution I do mean social tensions which expresses as e.g. discrimination, tension within families, disadvantaged positions on the labour market etc. In Kosovo is, as far as we know, no physical persecution.

7.. Eph 2:19.

8.. Cf. e.g. I Pet. 1:15, 16; 2:5, 9.

9.. The difference between the Serbian orthodox church, the catholic church and the protestant church is often unknown in Kosovo. I want to emphasize that it is, in no way, our intention to interfere in any political debate related to the existing tension between Serbs and Kosovar Albanians.

10. I am careful in using the notion of 'exile' for the Christian church. This has mainly to do with the fact that the exile was in the OT a punishment and judgement from God.

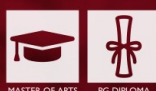
11. See e.g. I Pet. 1:4.

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Every night, thousands of young women leave their small apartments to go to certain streets of the big cities in France to sell their bodies to customers. As shadows in the night. Victims of human trafficking, of African and Eastern European origin. Nationwide, their number is estimated to be 4,000.

Friends of Rahab

In 2008, God touched my heart and inspired me to seek his will for my life. Soon after that, I and some others came in touch with a young woman from Nigeria in the street and were touched by her story. Let me call her Glory. At the age of six, her parents sold her as a slave to a couple, in exchange for a plot of land. She had to do all the work the other servants, slaves in fact, didn't want to do. She was often beaten. At the age of thirteen she was raped and became pregnant. After the birth of her child, her ordeal became worse as she was considered a pariah with a bastard child. Because she did not bring in enough money, this couple sold her to a network of pimps who forced her to take a long journey through several African countries, Spain and Italy, on to France.

The encounter with Glory led to the formation of *Les amies de Rahab* ('The friends of Rahab'), first in Nantes, then also in other cities. The vision God entrusted to us is to accompany the women victims of human trafficking on the path of freedom in Christ.

We created several groups: a prayer group, a group of volunteer visitors, a practical assistance group.

Lies

When I first met women like Glory in the street, I was so naïve to believe everything they said. After having met many of them, I know that everything they say in the beginning is false: their names, their age, their papers, their history, etc. In fact, their whole recruitment is based on lies. They arrive with a dream, to live a better life and to send money to their families in the village. Sometimes all this is done

with the complicity of parents or family members. Some girls know that they will prostitute themselves, others do not.

They are not told that they will be in the street for hours, that it will rain, that it will snow. When they arrive here, they realize the trap in which they fell. They are confronted with the problem of papers and deplorable living conditions. And they are told to repay a debt to their recruiters, ranging from 40,000 to 65,000 euros.

Fear and violence

Many of them are marked by a spirit of fear. Sometimes there is the fear that they will be cursed if they do not pay their debts. Then there is the violence. Physical violence by local pimps. Customers also can be aggressive, violent, perverse. These women are often racketeered by unscrupulous thugs who steal their cell phones or something else. They are insulted by passers-by and hunted by the police.

There is also violence among these women themselves, because often they live with three or four others in one studio. Fights are numerous. They do not trust each other.

The phenomenon of dissociation is often observed. To survive all the forced sexual acts, they learn to block their emotions and let the mind be absent from their body.

All of this makes these women, these girls, traumatized. They need to see, hear and feel the love of God in a practical way. Their greatest enemy is loneliness.

Objective and approach

When we meet them, we begin by showing them that there is a way of hope, because they all want to get out of their situation, even if, at times, they seem to express the opposite. Then we try to accompany them on this path. Even so, it is still a long way to the final stage, which is leaving them to pursue their new-found life themselves.

A key element of our work is prayer. We intercede for these women, alone or

in prayer groups. We pray with them in the street, when we meet them at home or when we accompany them for some administrative step.

Furthermore, we bring them a message from the Word of God who changes hearts and transforms lives. We read the Bible with them, individually or in groups. Although these women are victims, they know that they have made bad choices and that what they do with their bodies is not pleasing to God. Some unfortunately fall into the trap of love of money or justify their actions for all kinds of reasons but most of them want to change their life. The gospel is the good news of both forgiveness and true freedom.

Then we offer practical help, as indicated in Matthew 25. We bring *clothes*. Why? Because of the children. Some of these women try to escape their prostitution situation by seeking a French man to get them pregnant and obtain a residence permit. The problem is that they are left alone, with their child. We bring *food*. We visit them at several occasions, after aggression, childbirth, or attempted suicide. Authorities or police sometimes call upon us to intervene in such difficult situations. Sometimes we offer *financial* help, until they can support themselves or receive help from the state.

I often wondered why God called me as a man to reach out to these women. Certainly, to give them another image of a father, and another image of a man. They need fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters in the real sense of the term.

This article is a summary and translation of Summary of Marcel Geordel, 'Filles de Dieu en esclavage, Traite des êtres humains à des fins d'exploitation sexuelle', in Evert Van de Poll (ed.), Mission intégrale – Vivre, annoncer et manifester l'Évangile, pour que le monde croie... Charols (France), Excelsis, 2017, p. 133-142.



Like the rest of Europe, life for asylum seekers in Gloucester, England, is a 'liminal space' where they survive and wait, knowing they could be moved by the authorities at any time. "It is like living in an open prison without a status, charged of a crime without a name," says ECM missionary Rita Rimkiene, who with her husband Vidas Rimkus, founded the World Café.

The World Café is not a 'ministry' however - it is a community where the emphasis is on hospitality, friendship and valuing everyone's contribution. "My family in Lithuania was great at hosting parties and as a child, our flat was a place where people gathered and shared life. God brought that back to me when I met Him. Vidas and I have always been fond of having people join us for dinner, lunch and sometimes even breakfast"

As more people joined them, they began meeting in a church hall in central Gloucester, and the World Café Community was born.

Twice-monthly social events are held for between 80-150 people, sometimes even more. The asylum seekers and refugees cook meals from their own countries, with occasional British cuisine.

"Everybody comes together to eat, share their joys and troubles, celebrate child birth and mourn, share joys when receive refugee status and be encouraged when they are refused. This is the night when friendships are formed," says Rita.

While local people are encouraged to befriend the refugees and asylum seekers, "at the end of the day it does not matter who befriends who, we all just need to be encouraged and loved and experience unity despite of our religious, social or ethnic backgrounds. I love seeing people moving on in life and when it is really tough we can stand together."



The World Café supports asylum seekers who have particular professions like GP's where Home Office without a refugee status gives work permission. Generosity of local folk enables World Café to fund some of the exams. Recently, a Pakistani lady passed all the exams and is looking for a job.

Dalal was a Syrian 5 Star Hotel chef who recently arrived in Gloucester with his wife and three children. He has been volunteering at the World Café and using his amazing cooking skills around the city at various church events. The next step is to get Dalal into his own catering business with the help of local business people.

The café has also built relationships with other organisations, such as GARAS (Gloucestershire Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers) as well as with Fair Shares, a secular organisation, which helps to find volunteering jobs for all willing.

Rita sees the local involvement as two way: "we want to help local people to use their gifts," she says "such as sewing, English language teaching, arts, anything really, that can help people to connect and find a new trade or help develop

friendship by doing something together." This has included a local English teacher who had young children, so couldn't teach evening classes - but was available for the daytime English club, and even a local charitable trust who has been impressed by World Café's self-sustainable model which meets both physical and spiritual needs.

And the spiritual side is important too. "The World Café is funded and runs on the compassion and love of local people and churches," explains Rita. "It welcomes everybody, no matter of their faith and background and is a safe place for inter-religious dialogue. It is a place where Buddhists, atheists, Muslims and Christians feel equal, loved and nurtured.

"Muslims began to come to church on Sunday services. As a result of this, men's Bible study group started. When people make friends, we hear stories of churches looking after a refugee or an asylum seeking family or an individual. People celebrate Christmas and Easter, take people on holidays, camps and have Sunday dinners. During Ramadan Christians fast together and break fast. People started to pray together and read Holy Books."

"For example, a young Iranian came to the World Café for a meal. On Sunday he came to church to find out about Jesus, where he joined men's Bible study group. He went to every housegroup during the week until one day he accepted Christ as his Saviour and got baptised shortly after that. Now he is active within a youth group and has become one of World Café leaders."

So while asylum seekers and refugees are amongst the most marginalised in society, the vision of the World Café is to give them somewhere to belong through creating community.

As Rita explains: "The World Café has endless opportunities! 'The table' is the beginning of a journey together. As food sustains us physically, open conversation opens a door to our very being - our soul."

Jo Appleton

When Lucy came to my door that morning I could see that she was nervous. "Dan," she said, shaking. "I've got something to tell you. And because you are a Christian I'm afraid that you might drop me as a friend ... I'm in love with a woman."

I'd had some very close gay friends over the years, but it was Lucy's revelation that morning that God used to begin a journey of study, growth, reflection and compassion. Rather than pulling away from Lucy, as she feared, our friendship became closer. It happened organically. We'd been singing together as backing vocalists for years already. When we started a new band with Lucy's partner and several other gay women, before I knew it I was the sole, straight, married evangelical Christian performing at multiple gay music festivals, events and social gatherings. At one particular Pride festival as I looked out over the largely LGBT crowd, I had what I can only describe as a supernatural experience. For just a moment I caught a glimpse of the overwhelming agapic love that God had for those in front of me. My life has not been the same since.

I had theological questions. Of course I did (and do). But in that moment all of my questions were all c o m p l e t e l y overshadowed by the deep, underlying truth that my friends and this community are deeply, passionately loved by Jesus. That the truth of the gospel is as much for the LGBT community as it is for me. Our God stands with those who the world keeps at its margins, yet it is clear that many feel that there are additional hoops and obstacles placed in their path to Jesus because they are LGBT.

Pete started out as my neighbour but became one of my closest friends. A gardener in his mid-fifties, I admired his faith in Jesus, his biblical knowledge and his complete assurance of God's grace for him. But there was also deep sadness in him. As a gay Christian, he believed that in order for him to be faithful to Jesus he needed to live a life



Image: European Leadership Forum

of celibacy. Loneliness and grief over never having had a family and children led him to long periods of despair. He struggled to feel at home in church because, while they pointed to celibacy as the only option for a gay Christian, he rarely felt any support in walking this difficult, lonely road. In fact, he felt like an outsider.

Michael began attending an evangelical church because he saw something truly different in a Christian friend that he wanted to understand. Yet as a gay man, he felt there was an elephant in the room. No one said anything directly about his sexuality or explained what it had to do with faith, but Michael felt like he was on the outside of the community. He had a sense that he wouldn't fit in unless he changed something that seemed unchangeable. As he felt more out of place, he gradually stopped attending the church.

Kevin and Tom came to know Jesus as young people. For many years Kevin lived celibately out of obedience, but after years of biblical study and seeking God's will, he came to the conclusion that God could and would honour a committed marriage relationship with another man. Now Kevin and Tom are married and together lead a thriving spiritual community that points other LGBT people to Jesus.

I recognise the complexity and challenge in each of these stories for many of us. One or two of them might

even make you angry (or stop reading). As I have journeyed with these and other friends, some fundamental questions have emerged for me: Do I trust the Holy Spirit enough to allow him to work in people's lives in his own way and in his own timing? What kind of environments or faith communities clear the way of obstacles, allowing people often kept at the margins to feel like they are welcomed and even invited to journey with and toward Jesus?

In recent years I have been part of hosting several invitation-only conversations around how the church can grow in our love and engagement with LGBT people within our churches and in mission. We invited about 30 church and mission leaders and practitioners from across a theological spectrum from traditional to affirming, including those who identified as LGBT themselves. For everyone to speak freely and safely, the rules were confidentiality (personal stories and opinions shared had to stay within the room) and respect (disagreement was welcome, disrespect was not).

This was a fascinating experiment that taught me several things. Firstly, there is such division in the church across issues of sexuality and gender that it is rare to gather to hear directly from those who take a different point of view. Because we don't know one another's stories, we make all sorts of assumptions. "Those with an affirming perspective must not take scripture seriously ..." "Your traditional perspective means you don't care about LGBT people..." But by creating an

environment of safety, even over those few hours we were able to have deep dialogue and address tough questions. Relationship developed, and relationships are everything. When people from different backgrounds take time to listen to one another it's amazing how quickly they can connect. Secondly, church leaders (and individual Christians) often don't feel safe to discuss their questions on this subject in their church environments for fear of being labelled and even rejected. We feel like we need to work out what we think in our own heads, rather than discussing and addressing challenges to our theology and practice together. This is difficult to overcome, especially when it is the church leader that has questions to resolve. Thirdly, the majority church must stop referring to the LGBT community as if they are NOT us. There are many vibrant LGBT believers of multiple perspectives throughout the church. Some are quietly part of your congregation, perhaps wrestling alone. Other are passionately taking the lead in reaching out to the broader LGBT community with the love of Jesus. The church would be poorer without them.

A church leader recently asked me to help him talk through his conservative church's theology on LGBT issues. I asked: "What would your church do if a lesbian couple began to attend with their two children? What would it look like for that family to become part of your congregation and grow as disciples of Jesus?" This is by no means a fringe scenario in 2018, but this loving church leader groaned and expressed a hope that he wouldn't be put in this position. Was he actually hoping that gay couples and their children would not attempt to encounter Jesus' love in his church? I don't think so.

But I think we can be so paralysed by a fear of the unknown and of getting our theology wrong (and being judged for doing so by other Christians) that this can stop us from actively loving the people in front of us. This fear can limit our effectiveness in mission.

Let's take the initiative in building relationships across these artificial divides. Let's love, listen and strive to understand the stories of those on the margins and those with whom we think we disagree.

Even when it's complicated. Even when it is painful.

Let's treat LGBT people in our midst like people who are deeply loved by Jesus, not like an issue or a problem to be solved. Let's show compassion first and invite the Holy Spirit to help us know how to love and grow and challenge one another.

Let's actively create safe spaces where we can talk with one another with respect and without judgement as we aim to navigate situations that challenge our theology and worldview.

Let's deepen our knowledge of Scripture, never using it as a sledgehammer, asking God to help us grow in love, wisdom and depth of insight.

Let's create open-hearted communities where all are welcomed to begin a journey with Jesus, even if it messes with our neat theology and programmes. Let's recognise that often the journey to Jesus begins by being welcomed freely and without agenda into relationship with the people of God.

Danielle Wilson
(Names have been changed.)

INTRODUCING EVERT VAN DE POLL

We are delighted to have Evert Van de Poll join the Vista editorial team.

Evert is Professor of Religious Studies and Missiology at the Evangelical Theological Faculty in Leuven (B.), and pastor with the French Baptist Federation (FEEBF) with an itinerant teaching ministry.

Originally from the Netherlands, he studied at the Conservatory in Zwolle (piano, organ), and subsequently theology in Birmingham and Utrecht.

He and his wife Yanna moved to France in 1998 and currently live in Nimes. They have five children and five grandchildren.

They have led several church planting projects, first in the Netherlands and in France.

Evert's recent publications include: *Europe and the Gospel: Past Challenges, Present Influences, Mission Challenges* (2013), *Church Planting in Europe* (with Joanne Appleton, 2015), *Messianic Jews and their Holiday Practice: History, Analysis and Gentile Christian Interest* (2015), *Mission intégrale: vivre, dire et faire l'Évangile* (editor, 2017).



More information about his books and articles in English, French and Dutch on his personal website www.evertvandepoll.org and his ETF webpage www.etf.edu/medewerkers/evert-van-de-poll/

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