

2019 Hugh Price Hughes Lectures

“No Abiding City: Somewhere, Anywhere or In-Between”

Jennifer Potter

Firstly, thank you very much for your invitation to speak at these prestigious lectures. It is interesting to note that the series is bookended by Jennifers! I have been very aware of Hugh Price Hughes in recent months as I pass the blue plaque on his house when I go to SOAS to do some research and when I have been in South Wales, in his home territory. He was a man who moved great distances – both physically and intellectually. Whilst not claiming to come anywhere close to him, I, too, have moved great distances both physically and in my ideas.

All of the speakers for this series have not only spoken about migration but, in their various ways, have embodied it in their own lives, their very own ‘moving stories.’ This is true for me as you will have seen if you have read the brief biography in the flier for this series. I would like to expand on this a little to illustrate some of the complexities of migration. I have been an internal migrant within this country. Many people live out their lives within a close radius of where they were born but increasingly a greater percentage move for study or for work or as a result of marriage. I moved from my home in Yorkshire for study to Durham and London and for work to Zambia, Botswana and London. I retired from being a minister at Wesley’s Chapel last year and moved back to Harrogate for some time. I have now moved back south and live in Shirley near Croydon. When I told people in Harrogate where I was moving to many were incredulous – there was an assumption that people move to a lovely place like Harrogate not away from it to the crowded, hectic south! Indeed I was reminded of my mother’s experience. She was a very talented milliner in Harrogate and was offered a job with a well-known Hatmaker in London. Her mother refused her permission to go to what she considered ‘the evil city.’

As with Laurence Graham I became an international migrant because of the Church. The Church is and always has been ‘universal’ and migration has been integral to the life of people of from Old Testament times. Laurence and I were the tail end of the movement of missionaries from Europe and America to Africa, Asia and the Pacific yet we so easily overlook just how missionary the Church was throughout its history – from St Thomas travelling to India, Paul all around the Mediterranean, Catholic orders to South America, the East Indies and Japan and so much more including the Orthodox Church of which we know little. Judaism, Islam and Christianity have all been at heart ‘moving stories’

leaving religious and cultural ideas in their path as they moved. Trade and faith often went hand in hand.

These days, of course, there is a reverse movement of persons of faith to the Old World of Europe and North America – Korean and Brazilian missionaries to Britain for example and people, like Lawrence Law following their own nationals who have moved for political or economic reasons.

The moves I have made – both within my own country and outside – have been voluntary. I had choices. So much of contemporary migration is in one way or another, involuntary, forced by circumstances. When we reflect on modern migration we do need to remember that not all migration out from this country over the centuries was voluntary. Our Methodist ancestors, the Tolpuddle Martyrs were exiled to Australia for their audacity in organising agricultural labourers into a union and getting them to make a pledge. When they were pardoned they felt so alienated from their place of birth that all but one emigrated to Canada.

I mentioned earlier that I have been doing some research at SOAS. It is about Rev Thomas Shaw and one of the groups of 1820 settlers to the Eastern Cape in South Africa - this is ahead of the bicentenary next year. Many of Shaw's group were linked to Methodists in this very area of London – they formed themselves into the United Wesleyan Methodist Society. Their original leader was Edward Wynne, an active member of the Queen Street Chapel and most of the 96 who enrolled for their settler group were members there. I had imagined that these settlers were attracted by new opportunities in the wide open spaces of South Africa but it was not quite that simple. There was a degree of pressure on groups to form and agree to go to relieve the chronic unemployment and restlessness in this country at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Those who did travel soon realised that they had been sold a far too rosy picture – instead of great, fertile open spaces they found poor land, droughts and the ever-present danger of attacks from those whose land was now being given to them. Indeed one motive behind the whole project was for these settlers to form a buffer zone on the edge of the Cape Colony.

The most cruel and long-lasting forced migration was of Africans across the Atlantic to the West Indies and the Americas in the Slave Trade but we could list many others all around the world.

It is interesting to reflect on how we regard the outward migration from our own country in times past in contrast to how we regard inward migration now. It points up the power dynamic at the heart of this debate. As one of the powerful

colonial nations in Europe we did not consider it wrong to go in huge numbers to settle in other places as did Spanish and Portuguese in South America, Dutch in Indonesia, French in North and West Africa, and in Indo-China. For the British there was the ambition to colour the world map pink – settling in various ways in South and Central Africa, in the Caribbean, the Indian Sub-Continent and the Antipodes. Not only did we think we were doing nothing wrong, we thought or convinced ourselves that we had a civilising mission to more benighted regions of the world.

Migration is multi-faceted and in 2017 while I was still at Wesley's Chapel I did a Thursday lunchtime series on 'Moving Stories' as a contribution to the District's initiative. Indeed I thought that that series is what had got me this invitation to lecture on the topic though I later found out that that was not the main reason.

My idea behind that series was to put the current debate on migration into a much longer historical perspective and a much broader geographical one. I began with the stories of the Old Testament where migration is a continuing thread through the whole narrative with Abraham and his family as the star migrants. (Migrants are usually young men not the very elderly). Then I looked at the research that has been done on the origins of human ancestors – all evidence points to Africa as the cradle of humankind, the prototypical area for exporting migrants around our globe. Go back far enough and we are all migrants from Africa.

It is also important, in the context of the current debate with its clear strand of Islamophobia, to realise how Islam remained intellectually innovative during the European Dark Ages and how modern Europe was dependent upon the transmission of knowledge and ideas from the Islamic world – in mathematics, in architecture, in astrology and so much more. European scholars travelled to the Islamic world and scholars were invited back to come and share their riches. Arab scholars translated works into Greek and Latin. So much for the idea that Islam is backward and primitive, which some try to assert in our day. One of the members at Wesley's Chapel, Prof Charles Burnett is a world expert on the influence of Islamic culture and knowledge so it was wonderful to have him speak on this topic in that series.

Migration and Christian mission provided material for another talk and we have already alluded to that. War and the displacement caused by war was another focus – we think about this in connection with the two World Wars but, of course that was only the latest manifestation of this phenomenon. Let us recall that Christian Aid and our own MRDF (as it was known then, now All we Can)

were initially responses to the refugee crisis precipitated by the end of the war in Europe in 1945 and the enormous exercise in resettlement that took place .

One of the topics from that Thursday series that I would like to look at in more detail was entitled, 'From Refugees to Citizens: Good Stories.' I looked at two examples. There are many I could have chosen. The first is the case of the Huguenots – the Protestants in France whose lives were made unbearable by the Catholic Government. Migration from France to Britain (and other European countries) began as early as the 1540s but swelled to a flood after Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes (the agreement that had given some rights to Protestants) in 1685. Over a period of time more than 50,000 Huguenots came to England, a not inconsiderable number given that the whole population was only around 8 million at that time. It is of interest to note that the word 'refugee' came into the English language at this time from the French – 'one who seeks refuge or safety.'

Then, as now, owners of boats charged people to smuggle them across the Channel to England – 'plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose'. Then, as now some people welcomed the Huguenots as fellow Protestants, while others saw in them competitors for jobs or challengers of their trade. As early as 1631 the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers objected that its members were 'exceedingly oppressed by the intrusion of French Clockmakers.' No wonder the Huguenots settled in Spitalfields and Soho beyond the control of the City Guilds. Money was raised to help the refugees and the King and Queen, William and Mary gave £39,000. The last Huguenot pensioner to draw on this royal bounty died in 1876. Others set up self-help societies especially focussed around their French language churches, just as Ghanaians, Nigerians and a whole host of other groups have done recently.

And of course, John Wesley married Mary Vazeille, a Huguenot and the widow of a Huguenot trader.

Now all the Huguenots are integrated into British society, some not even aware of their interesting origins.

The other example of a tale of refugees to citizens involves a very different situation a world away from Europe - in Botswana. Botswana is a huge country in area but with a small population. During the war in Angola to throw out the Portuguese and then between rival factions, the people of South East Angola from the tribe of Hambukushu fled into Botswana. Over time there were about 3000 – a number that sounds small but was significant in that sparsely populated part of Botswana. They were called refugees but they did not think of

themselves like that. For generations their ancestors had moved along the Cubango/Okavango River which flows from Angola to the Okavango Delta in Botswana. That river was their road – they moved up and down freely according to the seasons or in times of drought and famine. Only the introduction of national boundaries had turned these Hambukushu into refugees. That is true in so many parts of the world, even into our own time with the creation of new countries in the Balkans, for example. Anyway to conclude our story of the Hambukushu – they were assisted to settle by the World Council of Churches, the local Botswana Council of Churches and by the fact that the local chief of that area granted them land to settle and cultivate. These people were talented basket makers and the Christian Council helped them market their products and get a regular income. After twenty years the Government granted them citizenship. The older generation still yearn for Angola but the youngsters are in school able to speak both the language of Botswana and English – they are well on their way to integration.

However, most refugees in our world are not in Europe or the USA – they are in the countries adjacent to areas of conflict. Millions of Syrians are in Lebanon and Turkey, millions from the DRC are in Uganda and Tanzania. Jordan still hosts vast numbers of Palestinians uprooted by the Israeli takeover of their land in past years. Next week is Refugee Week – a good opportunity to update ourselves on the huge numbers of people displaced inside and outside their countries of origin through no fault of their own.

During the Brexit Referendum people were bombarded with images of long queues of immigrants – asylum seekers, refugees trying to enter Britain. While it is true that immigration rates have increased in recent years it is also true that many people come by invitation to do jobs that British people are not prepared to do. Many are students who are allowed to remain and work for a few years after graduating. As immigration has become such a toxic political issue an increasingly hostile environment has been created in the country.

The title of my talk this evening comes from two quite different sources – ‘no abiding city’ is a Biblical reference from Hebrews to which we shall turn later.

‘Somewhere, anywhere or in-between’ refers to an article and a subsequent book by David Goodhart, founder and one-time editor of the liberal magazine ‘Prospect.’ He caused a real stir in 2004 when he wrote an article in Prospect entitled, ‘Too Diverse?’ as related to Britain at that time. Trevor Phillips reacted to the article by calling it ‘gentle xenophobia.’ Goodhart became persona non grata among some sections of liberal British society.

Well what was he saying? His thesis was that British society was made up of three basic types of people. Firstly the ones he called ‘somewheres’ – people rooted in a particular place, often socially conservative, possibly less well-educated and with an identity very much grounded in their locality. Then there are the ‘anywheres’ who tend to be younger, often urban, university educated and footloose. These are the people for whom the world, our globalised world, is their oyster. They are internationally mobile – employed by transnational business, the UN or NGOs and with highly marketable qualifications. I remember one of my former students in Botswana. She had a very good and well-paid job in Gaborone, the capital and she quit to take a job overseas. ‘Why?’ I asked her have you made this move. ‘I want to be globally marketable,’ she replied clearly having mapped out a transnational career path. Then, according to Goodhart there are the in-betweeners on the way from somewhere to anywhere. This is an interesting thesis, which certainly contains some truths. Commentators on the Brexit referendum have used it to identify the ‘somewheres’ with those who voted leave. That is far too simplistic but it is true that there are some people whose life has been impacted negatively by the forces of globalisation, especially as whole industries have disappeared from the UK. Goodhart would maintain that large scale immigration without a great effort at integration weakens the ties of trust and mutual obligation on which our welfare state depends.

But looked at from the perspective of those migrating the picture is very different. Even the poorest person in the most remote place has a mobile phone connecting them to the ‘promised land’ whether that be the USA, Germany or Britain. Many have relatives overseas sending back money. Many countries would be in dire economic trouble if it were not for the remittances sent ‘home’ by their nationals working elsewhere. The would-be migrant wants a decent wage, education for children, safety and hope in a stable society – indeed just what we want for ourselves.. Lionel Shriver wrote an article last October in *The Spectator* about how the march of the migrants from South America poses a dilemma for the USA. She wrote, ‘People from South America are people – deserving people. The difference between them and us isn’t qualitative, it’s geographical – they’re there and we’re here.’

So what is the way forward for us as a nation and for us as Christians?

There is no easy answer. There is no one answer. We have to recognise the complexity of our world and respond flexibly. We need to work hard to get the facts and to look at the situation in the round. Migration is not an aberration of

our time but a fact of life throughout history. Migrants have often been the most dynamic and productive members of society. Europe after World War Two asked for migrants – from the Commonwealth - Caribbean and Asia in Britain’s case, from Turkey in the case of Germany. It is difficult to turn the tap of people on and off like water as the economy or attitudes change. As the Swiss novelist, Max Frisch wrote in a similar vein to Lionel Shriver, ‘we imported workers and got people instead.’ The economies of ageing Europe and Japan need younger people if they wish to operate as they do now.

For needed workers more effort has to be put in to negotiate circular migration with other countries – come, contribute, earn, learn and return. With careful planning this could be a win-win situation as opposed to what happens now as we ‘steal’ the trained manpower – doctors and nurses in particular – from other countries who can ill-afford to lose them. We need a much more balanced discussion on matters of migration and an end to the ‘hostile environment.’ We need to face facts – we cannot want to reduce immigration and yet, at the very same time, still have well-staffed NHS hospitals – nearly one third of doctors in Britain come from overseas. So we need better policies to allow in both well-qualified high end people and also those who do the jobs that most British people do not want to do – picking fruit, working in care homes and doing long hours cleaning offices. Where would London be if it were not for the army of people who work before most people get to work?

Then there is the question of refugees and asylum seekers. We need to regain our reputation as a caring country offering help to people in need. We need to have far clearer and legal ways for people to enter the country. As long as legal entry is so difficult we provide the fertile ground for people smugglers.

But, of course, we cannot be open for ever-increasing numbers of migrants – there is a need for controls. We have seen recently that new immigrants are not so well integrated into British society as previous waves. Goodhart is on to something when he talks about unsustainable rates of migration. The country needs time and a willingness to absorb people from other places.

This is where Churches and also Mosques and all other religious groups have vital role to play. It is well known that people newly migrated to a country look to live or associate with people from a similar language and cultural background as they seek to learn new ways. (Note the ghettos of British migrants in Southern Spain some of whom never bother to learn Spanish or to socialise with the local people.) Faith communities have served as centres for the preservation and reinterpretation of individual and collective identity. They are, at their best, a school for citizenship into the new society whilst preserving the safety and

identity of newcomers. That is why the rate of migration is so important – numbers have to be such that this process can happen naturally and fully. We heard from Lawrence Law how second and third generation Chinese are bilingual and bicultural – at home with their British age mates and in their Chinese community.

The national fellowships in London Methodism are also an example of this – Ghanaians, Fijians, Nigerians, Filipinos, Koreans are all urged and usually are members of regular congregations in British Methodism but the fellowships allow them to worship in their own language and style. We know from our own experience how these people can ‘switch codes’ as appropriate. Churches and other faith groups are a vital bridge for newcomers. If this works well it also demands of us that we, to a lesser extent, become bilingual and bicultural – able to be a bridge between our fellow countrymen who have little or nothing to do with migrants and the newcomers themselves.

As Christians, although we are rooted locally, we know that we are citizens of a kingdom which has no boundaries, has no quotas and requires no visas. We have no abiding city. Our promised land is where we are at any time as we seek to live out our Christian vocation in that place. ‘Act globally and think locally’ was a Christian Aid slogan some years ago.

While I was at Wesley’s Chapel I was Chair of the Islington Faiths Forum – it was very interesting and at times challenging. What was very marked was that mosques, as with synagogues in earlier generations, are also acting like churches actively seeking to help integrate newcomers into being truly British as well as fully Muslim.

All of this is not an easy vocation for people of faith but a crucial one in responding to the needs both of newcomers and in being a bridge to wider society. If you have not seen the installation and videos of Applecourt called Transitions and made for the ‘Moving Stories’ initiative, I suggest you ask for it to come to your church.

I would like to end with part of the Immigrants’ Creed, written by Jose Luis Casal, General Missioner of the Presbyterian Church in the USA and quoted by Laurence Graham in his lecture

‘I believe that the Church is the secure home
For foreigners and for all believers
I believe that the communion of saints begins
When we embrace all God’s people in their diversity.

I believe in life eternal, in which no one will be a foreigner
But all will be citizens of the Kingdom
Where God reigns for ever and ever. Amen'