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# Church's response to migrants' quest for identity formation

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Migration has received diverse responses from the dominant powers in the political, social and religious spheres. Assimilation, domination and cohesion are some of the responses to the integration of people who cross regional and national borders and reside within their new locations for a considerable period of time. These responses include both positives, which are largely short-term solutions, with a lot of losses and trauma for the migrants. The reasons for these kinds of responses lie in the factors that cause and influence migration. Political and religious conflict, economics, societal factors such as language and culture, health issues such HIV or AIDS and other pandemics and environmental factors are some of the causes of migration.

**Contribution:** This research will contribute to determining the relationship between the church and migration for identity formation. The question I wish to explore is how the church can respond to the quest for identity which shapes the social welfare and cultural co-existence of the South African society and migrants in post-apartheid South Africa. Because of the complexity of identity and the effect that migration has (had) on shaping identity, I will first provide a description of migration and identity. The article will then address the factors that cause migration and the possible ways in which migration can shape identity. A brief discussion of a theology of migration will be introduced. This will be followed by a critical discussion of how the church as a pilgrim community can contribute to identity formation and the peaceful co-existence of differentiated people.

**Keywords:** migration; church; identity; theology of migration; pilgrim church; hospitality; imago Dei.

## Introduction

Migration has contributed to the rise in the discussions of important questions of identity through ever-changing social patterns, cultural practices and the shifting of timeless boundaries. In post-apartheid South Africa and many parts of the world, identity concerns the engagement or disengagement of migrants from different parts of the world. Migration from other parts of Africa has particularly raised important questions about national identities, nation state approaches to relocation and citizenship.

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# Migration and identity

According to the International Organisation for Migration (Perruchoud & Redpath-Cross 2011), migration is:

> [T]he movement of a person or a group of persons, either across an international border or within a State. It is a population movement, encompassing any kind of movement of people, whatever its length, composition and causes; it includes migration of refugees, displaced persons, economic migrants and persons moving for other purposes, including family reunification. (pp. 62–63)

This is a general definition that it is widely used in migration studies and related discourses. It is usually used alongside the 1998 United Nations definition which gives a specific minimum period of 1 year as the length of stay of a person or group of people in a country other than their own (UN 2002). Fredericks (2015:11) concludes that these definitions and other similar ones provide valuable frameworks for administrative purposes, but it is very problematic and serves a variety of purposes 'in order to advance their own cause'. Fredricks also asserts that definitions of migration that are based on geography do not take seriously the issue of identity and identity formation (2015:13). The question is not how the receivers or hosts make sense of migrants, but how migrants identify themselves in the experiences of moving to places with strict boundaries and solid barriers.

Migration remains one of the most significant postcolonial phenomena that shapes identity and is shaped by identities. Migration challenges fixed and normative boundaries. On the other hand, migration is also a result of people seeking a meaning to life and this might result in migrating to new geographical locations. Louw (2016) demonstrates the destabilising effect of migration on identity:

> [I]n the February edition of the *National Geographic Magazine*, Cynthia Gorney warned against the possible devastating effects of migration worldwide on local communities. Immigration has inevitably a destabilising impact on the constellation of traditional views on what a nation and citizenship is about. (p. 3)

Using the metaphor of hospitality in relation to migration and refugees, Langmead (2015) advances the duality of centrifugal and centripetal forces:

> In this double action we are drawn into mutuality rather than a relationship of distribution from the center. In this double action is the possibility, indeed likelihood, that both partners will be transformed. (p. 178)

The metaphor of hospitality has been closely used with theological doctrines such as the image of God, the word of God and the mission of God These theological doctrines are used to explain issues of identity and there is a direct relation between religion, migration and identity. Banja (2020) asserts that:

> [T]hese Christian notions of the image of God, word of God and mission of God have been used to frame studies that have investigated how church communities had responded to migration. For example, Settler (2018) delineated this orientation into two perspectives, namely, those concerned with how the migrants move with, and use their religious traditions and practices, in which case the focus is on discourses of incorporation and hospitality. (p. 5)

Furthermore, Settler and Mpofu (2017) caution that:

> … despite its orientations towards inclusion, protection and integration, what these theological analyses have in common is that they rely on an idea of religion that presupposes an idea of the migrant 'other' as apolitical and asexual, vulnerable and ready for incorporation into the host culture. (p. 22)

Considering the fluctuations of identities in relation to migration, identity formation will be considered as an open process that is in creative tension between normativity and fluidity. Identity is not a fixed construct but a moving constant that interacts with continuous encounters and that shapes and is shaped through interactionist encounters:

> There is something fixed about who we are. For example, we have some universal characteristics that separate humans from non-humans. If nationality is determined by birth then national identity is a fixed phenomenon. So too tribe is fixed. On the other hand, status, group membership and religion may all impact on identity's fluidity. There are some common characteristics and values that are shared amongst people or a group of people. There are also some distinctive and different characteristics about ourselves. (Klaasen 2017:154–155)

Migration and identity are concepts that have meaning within their social, political, cultural and theological contexts. The variations and differentiated descriptions and definitions of the terms are tantamount to the functionalities and purpose of the descriptions and definitions of the terms. The use of identity and migration is to avoid the limitations of confined definitions. The church community is that space that provides the constancy and fluidity of migration and identity. In its substance and functionality, the church community provides encounters that affirm the humanity and potential personhood of migrants. The former (humanity) is the constant that is universal and the latter (personhood) is the moving towards maturity.

# Factors that cause migration
## Economics

There are a number of factors that cause migrants to move from their original place of living. The first of these factors is economics. Migrants are closely connected to the colonial growth of the 18th century of South Africa and the discovery of natural minerals in the 19th century. Migrant labourers from neighbouring countries and other continents were largely responsible for the accelerated economic expansion of the mineral industries. In the same way that migrants were confined to certain spaces through migration policies, black South Africans were also confined to certain spaces that affected their identity and limited economic activities:

In the post-apartheid era, South Africa has had to manage gradual but substantive change in migration flows towards its territory and labour market. The profile of migrants to South Africa, the sectors in which they have been hired and the reaction of the local population, recently reincorporated into the polity but still relatively marginalised socio-economically, have been the key challenges. Effort to improve immigration governance recently culminated in a new migration polity. (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] & International Labour Organization [ILO] 2018:40)

## Globalisation

Schreiter (2005:76–79) attributes three aspects – technology, economic and political – to globalisation which shaped human identity and the challenges and factors that impact worldviews. The effects of easy access, transnational economic policies and practices and interconnected politics make human movement between local and global locations much more viable than before the era of technology. Schreiter (2005:80) concludes that according to the 2004 United Nations Development Report, approximately 'one out of every thirty-five people on the planet is now a migration. In Europe, the number jumps to one out of twelve'.

Easier access does not guarantee better social well-being nor greater freedom. Whilst migrants can have access to people, places, environments and worldviews that were unattainable before, this does not mean enhancement of identity and equality. Globalisation contributes to both the increasing freedoms of migrants and to the alienation of people. Privatisation, neo-liberal capitalism and nation states exclude migrants as some of the most vulnerable to civil society, competition-oriented markets and citizenship.

## Conflict and wars

Ethnic conflict, religious conflict and global terrorism remain the primary contributors to immigration. The period immediately after the Cold War was followed by local, ethnic and intra-state conflicts. Breakaway ethnic groups from the main state group because of political differences and neighbouring groups that were held together by dual political systems are some of the origins of conflict and wars. Global terrorism has managed to undermine and sometimes weaken state powers and influence:

> The attacks on the United States in 2001, in Indonesia in 2002 and in Spain in 2003 have been key moments in this new development. The war in Iraq is now being fought between invading powers and a collection of stateless forces. (Schreiter 2005:82)

South Africa is the largest 'pull' country (to use the so-called push and pull factors theory) for migrants from the rest of Africa.

For most, breaking from the main group or existing alongside another group may result in the negotiation of spaces and new identities. Movements because of wars and conflict are not necessarily voluntary or by choice, but through force and violence. Loss of belonging and experience of trauma can result in acceptance of a foreign identity for the sake of survival or temporary peace.

## Social factors

Notwithstanding that wars and conflict contribute to migration, there are also social factors such as family, education, study and sport that play an equal role in migration in the African context. Flahaux and De Haas (2016) contend that:

> [M]ore and more micro-evidence emerges indicating that most Africans migrate for family, work and study (Schoumaker et al., 2015; Bakewell & Jonsson, 2011), as is the case in other world regions. (p. 2)

Flahaux and De Haas (2016:2) continue to assert that it would be hard to discard the often less published reasons for migration, which include 'perhaps mundane social processes that drive mobility, the search for an education a spouse or a better life in the city' (Bakewell & Bonfiglio, 2013:4).

Social factors such as family, searching for a spouse or births influence identity through a stage of personal status as well as legal status. In many African countries, getting married or being born in the residing country that is not your country of origin gives new legal and social status. The change in status is usually accompanied by new benefits such as permits to work, to draw social grants, free or subsidised education and other social services that citizens of the country will enjoy.

The factors mentioned above are not an exhaustive list of factors that cause the phenomenon of migration. The factors can be regarded as a hybrid of causes that represent the many and varied factors that give rise to migration; social, conflict and wars, globalisation and economic factors illustrate the different reasons why people migrate to unknown and alien spaces and places. The causes of migration are not only the 'pull-push' phenomenon that suggests that migration is primarily between the developed (pull) and developing (push) worlds.

The factors also represent the causes of migration that seriously consider the neglected research subject of identity formation or lack of identity formation. The factors causing migration are mostly viewed from negative perspectives from the sending country and from a positive perspective from the receiving country. These dominant negative and positive perspectives influence and determine identity formation. Flahaux and Haas (2016) refer to the 'migration transition theory' as evidence that the so-called push factors do not necessarily increase migration. Referring to migration in Africa, Flahaux and De Haas (2016) claim that:

> [T]o understand why development is generally associated to more migration, it is important to move beyond views of (African) migrants as objects which are passively pushed around by external 'push' factors such as poverty, demographic pressure, violent conflict or environmental degradation, analogous to the way physical objects are attracted or repelled by gravitational or electromagnetic forces. (p. 4)

## Theology, migration and identity

Around a decade ago, Groody wrote one of the most important articles regarding the theology of migration. At that time, very little academic writings about the theology of migration had been published. Migration has been well-documented in social science literature with an emphasis on the nation-state methodology and approach that served the aims and purposes of the host nation. The turn towards polity and legality was an attempt to keep the nation-state in place and alienate, assimilate or dominate the migrants. The rise of a theology of migration shifted the focus to the lived experience of the migrants and the migrants as the lens through which migration as a global reality is addressed.

Groody (2009) introduced a theology of migration with four foundations. The *imago Dei, Verbum Dei, missio Dei* and *visio Dei* form the four foundations for a theology of migration that is both contextual and foundational (2009:642). His contribution has a direct implication for the identity of human beings, both the hosts and the guests, the nation and the stranger.

The doctrine of the *imago Dei* is a very different departure point from the 'push-pull' theory or modern migration polity of migration. Unlike the political, social and economic aims of modern migration polity, the theological doctrine of the *imago Dei* addresses migration from the inherent, internal identity of the migrant. In other words, identity is not about the separation of us–them, host–guest, nation–alien, legal–illegal, but it is about the migrant's own identity. This latter perspective challenges the often alienation, marginalisation, domination and assimilation of migration policies. Groody (2009) distinguishes theology from the social science perspectives of migration by contending that:

> [T]his is not just another label but a way of speaking profoundly about human nature. Defining all human beings in terms of imago Dei provides a very different trajectory for the discussion. Imago Dei names the personal and relational nature of human existence and the mystery that human life cannot be understood apart from the mystery of God. (p. 644)

The doctrine of the *imago Dei* has come under renewed scrutiny because of the absolute uniqueness of the human being in relation to other living beings and non-living beings. New developments of the doctrine do not dispute the nature of humans in terms that it has been created in the image of God, but that it alone is created in the image of God. The latter has resulted in the destruction of the environment, the extinction of certain species and the separation of humans from humans and the rest of creation. Horan (2019) raises three categories that represent modern approaches to the *imago Dei*. The rejection of the *imago Dei* by David Cunningham centres around:

> … the ambiguity of 'image' (selem) to be almost insurmountable and, given the paucity of scriptural support for its usage, proposes an alternative term to serve as the focal point for the doctrine that would be rooted in an amore that Clough calls a 'humanist separatist' tendency of our deeply anthropocentric vision of imago Dei. (p. 95)

The term that he uses is *flesh* (sarx). He contends that God relates to all flesh which implies more than the human species (2019:95). Instead of replacing the term 'image', Joshua Moritz suggests a redefinition of imago Dei by replacing it with a theology of election. Instead of claiming the uniqueness of *Homo sapiens* as intrinsically unique, it suggests that God elects humans to be *imago Dei*. A third approach to the *imago Dei* is propagated by Langdon Gilkey who propounds for the expansion of the *imago Dei*. Gilkey uses a 'vestigial approach' that shows an appreciation for the traditional characteristics of imago, but also draws upon the presence of the 'divine in nature'. He bases his view on the three characteristics that are present in 'the whole natural world'. The three characteristics are 'the *dynamic power*', 'order' and 'unity of death with life' (Horan 2019:87–105). Horan adds a fourth approach to the *imago Dei* that places humans as unique but not absolute unique. The *imago Dei* is broadly understood when:

> … humans reflect the divine image when, as Francis noted, we live in such a way and pattern our choices after God's plan for us. So, too, our non-human creaturely neighbours reflect the divine image when they live and move and have their being in accord with God's plan for them. (Horan 2019:119)

None of these approaches have suggested a distinction amongst human beings, although the power relations between human beings and the rest of creation have been criticised. Horan, in particular, rejects the absolute uniqueness of human beings that resulted in the separation of human beings from non-human beings. With regard to migration, the *image of God* provides a theology that is inclusive of all human beings. The term supports the inclusive approach of all human beings, irrespective of their location, space or original residence. Migrants are not contrasted or antagonised against citizenship, the nation or host; instead, migrants are part of the species of humans who are created in the image of God. *Imago Dei*, although a theological term, has universal implications and scope. The term has equivalent meaning-making terms in 'other religious, philosophical and humanitarian traditions'. Human dignity as a trait of being human, although rooted in theological foundations, is closely related with human dignity as expressed in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1951 United Nations Convention charter on refugees. The term affirms the humanity and equal worth of each person. The criteria are not where the person is originally from, where the person resides or where the person is moving, but the person is valued by the constant – to be created in the image of God. Inherent in each person is worth, value and human dignity.

Image of God also refers to a specific relationship amongst human beings. It is not restricted to absolute autonomous human; the person is relational. Drawing from the Cappadocian Fathers' notion of the Trinity and the perichoretic paradigm of what it means to be a person, Klaasen (2013) propounds that:

> [T]he view of a person here differs from the Enlightenment emphasis on the individuality of humans. The individual is independent or separated from others, while a person finds identity through its interaction with others. (p. 187)

Groody (2009) further claims that the Trinity as relational supports that:

> [M]ost migrants leave their homes not only to realise a greater dignity for themselves but also for their families. Statistics on global remittances offer one indicator of the connection between migration and relationships. In 2006, migrants sent home to their families, often in small amounts of $100 to $300 at a time, more than $300 billion. Meanwhile the total Overseas Development Aid from donor nations to poorer countries was $106 billion. This means that migrants living on meager means spent three times as much money helping alleviate global poverty as the wealthiest countries of the world. (p. 647)

*Worth* and *dignity* are not only concepts associated with abstract ideas, but are embedded in actual and lived experience. Having basics to live a life of dignity includes sharing in the economy of the country. Sharing in the economy does not imply receiving aid at the discretion of the host, but exercising agency with freedom. It means that economics is not measured by financial metrics (Gross Domestic Product [GDP]), but is the measure of participation of all those residing in a country. The dignity of all persons, especially the poor, the marginalised and strangers is protected in favour of profit (Groody 2009:646).

Image of God propounds the identity of migrants on an equal basis with the host nations. The consequence of such a position, which differs from the dominant social sciences and empirical studies, is that the starting point of any investigation of migration starts with the assumption of the human dignity of migrants, their agency and their rights to basic living conditions. Image of God as a symbol of identity also challenges the false dichotomies of us–them, host–stranger and nation–illegal alien. Instead, image of God has a perichoretic relationship and person as the constant of universal for all human beings. These assumptions support the freedom and agency of migrants, irrespective of the space, place and time that they occupy. Polity and laws that support division, and ultimately, domination, are replaced with mutual and reciprocal growth towards a greater inclusive personhood.

## Pilgrim church and hospitality

The church is depicted by many symbols, metaphors and models. The church is also described with regard to its substance and its functions. The church in relation to migrants in theological terms is referred to as 'hospitality' and 'pilgrim'. These two metaphors represent both the substance and function of the church, yet challenge the role of the church in the growing global migration trends and movements. Whilst the church has been a refuge and home for many migrants, the extent to which it challenges the false identities of migrants comes under scrutiny from theological approaches to the research of migrants.

Pilgrim church is not a new phenomenon. Phillipps (2015) maintains that:

> [C]hristianity's understanding of being the pilgrim church crystallized in the milieu of the brutal oppression in which

Christianity was born, and their existence and identity is inextricably tied to this experience. (p. 161)

The word pilgrim derives its meaning from the Latin *peregrinus,* which refers to someone who comes from a foreign part. The Greek equivalent, *paroikia,* means 'resident alien or foreigner' (2015:162). The Second Vatican Council designated the pilgrim church as one of the themes. Phillipps (2015) draws attention to the paradox of the two terms:

> There is a paradoxical tension inherent in this pilgrimage motif. While in some sense there is less certainty, safety and surety in setting out, there is also the confidence that comes with having faithful companions on the journey, and the trust that comes with dependence upon God for guidance. Thus, the opening passage of the church's pastoral constitution, Gaudium et Spes, depicts a pilgrim church of vulnerable travellers bonded together on their journey, one community in Christ, with the Spirit as their guide. (pp. 162–163)

Pilgrim church is fluid, yet it has firm foundations. The church is open and welcoming to those who are different. The church has firm foundations like tradition, the Word, confessions and doctrines which provide constancy. The church gathers all persons from all parts of the world, from different cultures, languages and habits into a continuous journey of wholemaking. Migrants fit this category well and the church affirms their identity based on the affirmation of human dignity and freedom of all people. Pilgrim church models the moving, fluid identity of the migrant. Pilgrim church affirms migrants as created in the image of God. The journey of migrants is meaningful within the divine journey of the church with Christ as its head.

Pilgrim church is also connected with the symbol of hospitality. Hospitality does not refer to acts of generosity that enhance the power over others. Such hospitality results in domination and dependence. Hospitality towards migrants can easily become selfish and self-serving. Langmead (2015) argues for the use of hospitality as:

> … much more than offering a meal or bed, or making someone feel comfortable in our presence. It is a strong and multidimensional concept similar to that of public friendship in classical Greek times, which (although only available between peers) involved solidarity and defence of the other. (pp. 176–177)

Hospitality is the selfless act of welcoming those on the margins to the centre. It is not just about the migrant's identity, but it challenges the identity of the host in relation to that of the migrant. The identity of the migrant and the host is inextricably connected to each other.

Christian hospitality is radically different from aid. Louw (2016) rightly claims that:

> [C]hristian hospitality counteracts the social stratification of the larger society by providing an alternative based on the principle of equality; everyone is welcome regardless of background, status, gender or race. (p. 9)

Furthermore, Louw (2016) draws from Derrida's (2001). notion of hospitality as:

> [A] kind of social paradox: unconditional love becomes conditional; it focuses conditionally on the outsider in order to make outsiders insiders even beyond the categories of juridical equality; it functions outside of right, above what is judicial. (p. 9)

Pilgrim church and hospitality invite the migrant into a process where movement draws all people towards each other. Relationships are for the mutual enrichment and growth of all persons. Those who are pilgrims, strangers, aliens and marginalised find companionship with the hosts, the resident and centre. The other becomes life-giving and meaning-making. Both are transformed into the uniqueness with which God created all humanity.

Pilgrim church and hospitality reinterpret economics as the extent to which it serves the full humanity of all people and, in particular, the migrants. Economics is viewed as more than GDP. Migrants are not commodities that can be exchanged for the benefit of the powerful, but migrants are the Other who contribute to the fulfilled life lived in reciprocal relationships with other persons. Within the notion of pilgrim church, economics serves all people. The migrants do not serve competition for profit at the expense of their human dignity.

Pilgrim church and hospitality provide the space for the migrants to be who God created them to be. Created in the image of God, migrants find the church a place of nourishment of their identity. Migrants do not have to assimilate or alienate themselves for the sake of dominant cultures, but as pilgrims they join the multitude of different patterns, forms, habits, customs and languages towards wholemaking. Langmead (2015) claims that:

> [I]f the churches in the 'receiving' country catch the vision of mission as hospitality, strangers will become guests, and then hosts. Those without defenders in their old country will have advocates in the new. Those on the margins will, at least in faith communities, become 'insiders, 'at home'. Our welcome will in some way reflect God's abundant welcome. (p. 178)

The pilgrim church is on the move and migrants form a fundamental part of such a notion of what it means to be church. Migrants remind us that the church is beyond the physical building and like Jesus and the disciples, the church moves with those who carry the mark of the image of God.

# Conclusion

Migration is becoming a topic of growing research area in theology. Migration studies have made greater strides in the social sciences, although the emphasis has been on nation-state, binaries, polity and the hosts. Theological approaches, such as the doctrine of the *imago Dei,* have shifted research to the migrants and the pastoral implications for persons in foreign spaces. Within the context of South Africa, a critical look at the *image of God* will contribute to the role that migrants play within identity formation. New perspectives of this doctrine contribute towards a more inclusive approach to the migrant crisis in South Africa. This doctrine can bring out new formulations of relationships and how difference is beneficial for identity formation and transformations. In theology, the focus has mainly been the loss and brokenness of the migrants through domination, alienation and assimilation. This contribution addresses the quest for identity by people on the move. The definitions and descriptions of migration and identity are problematised to demonstrate the fluidity of identity and how integral identity formation is. The causes of migration result in identity formation and play an important role in the quest for integration and participation within a shared space.

The *imago Dei* theology of migration supports the identity formation of migrants. It also provides a different basis for migrant studies. Instead of separation, binaries and preservation of nation-state identity, *imago Dei* affirms the equality and universal uniqueness that migrants share with their hosts. This theology assumes that migrants occupy a central position with the hosts in the country of residence, irrespective of the length of time.

*Imago Dei* challenges concepts such as *stranger* and *alien* that have negative connotations with reference to migrants. Coupled with the pilgrim church and hospitality, the modern notions of economics are challenged for its competitive and profit orientations. Instead, pilgrim church perpetuates economics for its contribution to the well-being of all citizens, including migrants. Well-being includes material and emotional factors. Pilgrim church reinterprets relationships as mutual and reciprocal growing. The migrant is not the separated other who needs aid, but migrants contribute to the identity formation and well-being of all persons within the affected geographical area and also on a transnational level.

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## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed during this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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