

THE STRANGER AMONG US

By Paul V. Canfield



Paul Canfield and his wife, Vivian, are Central Region's Home Missionaries to Minneapolis.

Every 31 seconds a new immigrant arrives in the United States. The face of America has forever changed. The Hispanic population in the U.S. has surpassed the African American population. Some demographic experts predict that by 2042 there will be no single dominating ethnic majority in the U.S.

The challenges immigrants face when adapting to American life are similar to a missionary adjusting to life in a foreign land. Many have spent long years in deplorable refugee camps. Here in America the culture, language, customs, values, abundance of material possessions or lack thereof, and need for basics to survive cause great stress. Add to that stress newly found freedom and the fast pace of life in America, and it can be overwhelming. Many yearn to return to their homelands. Immigrants often work two or three jobs to make ends meet, jobs that are often menial in nature and quite different from their training.

Globalization has three elements: urbanization, global migration, and the need for labor. More than half of the world's population now live in cities. Masses of people migrate globally, from nation to nation. The global economy fuels the need for a larger labor force.

The hope and freedom our nation offers is a



Paul Canfield presents Open Bible credentials to Paul Zondo

dream for most immigrants. Though immigrants and refugees are found in most U.S. cities, Miami, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis, all with large immigrant populations, serve as "Gateway Cities." Most refugees cannot choose the country to which they will move. They are relocated to places approved by the United Nations and the adoptive country. Each city with a large immigrant population is a fertile harvest field for the Church.

Mission Minneapolis

Mission Minneapolis was born in the heart of Open Bible Central Region Executive Director Ken Groen. For years Central Region had a burden to plant new churches in Minneapolis. In the fall of 2009, Central Region, in cooperation with Mountain Plains Region, will send a team to Minneapolis to plant a new church. The city's growing immigrant population also caught Ken Groen's attention. The Central Region Board decided to target the immigrants with an aggressive church planting strategy.

In April 2008 my wife, Vivian, and I were appointed as Central Region Open Bible missionaries to work among the Minneapolis immigrants. Our goal is to establish new Open Bible churches by identifying immigrants who successfully planted churches in their homelands, who are unaffiliated with a church denomination in the U.S., and are interested in partnering with Open Bible to reach the immigrant community.

Minneapolis, a city of 3.3 million people, houses 677,000 immigrants. More than 150 languages are spoken. The Phillips neighborhood boasts 75 ethnic restaurants and 100 languages in a six-block area. Currently there is one Open Bible church in the Minneapolis area, a Liberian congregation called River of Life Open Bible Church, pastored by Paul Zondo.

We are developing relationships with Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Liberian pastors and congregations. Other contacts have been made with Nigerian, Salvadorian, and Guatemalan pastors. Immigrants that have come from war, poverty, and persecution are deeply grateful to America. During one meeting of the Liberian Ministers Association, the speaker led the group in intense, heartfelt intercessory prayer for the United States. "We all came here with the shirt on our backs," he said. "This country blessed us and helped us."

People in transition are more receptive to the gospel. If the Church in America reaches out to immigrants, a harvest will follow. If the Church is not intentional in reaching the "stranger among us" other religions will, and many will be lost. Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism are actively pursuing immigrants. Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States. One hundred mosques operate

in Minneapolis alone. The largest Hindu temple in the United States is located in a northern suburb of the city. The largest Buddhist temple in the States is located in a southern suburb.

The Challenge to the American Church

The Great Commission is central to everything God does. I believe God brought these people to us so they might be reached with the Gospel. Many immigrants who know the Lord unashamedly testify of their faith. As they communicate with relatives "back home," they become a bridge in reaching nations where American missionaries are not welcome.

The harvest for which we pray could be among the

masses of immigrants God brought us. Pray God will open our eyes to the harvest. Second, let us sensitize ourselves to the immigrants around us. Simple acts of kindness and understanding can build bridges between cultures. Third, let us make our church buildings available to immigrant churches to hold services.

God reminds us to be mindful of the stranger among us. "You shall neither mistreat a stranger nor oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:21, NKJ). "I was a stranger and you took Me in" (Matthew 25:35, NKJ). This window of opportunity may last only a short time. Let us take advantage of it.



Paul Zondo

Pastor Ministers to Immigrant Church

Paul Zondo escaped the civil war in Liberia in 1994 and spent the next six years in refugee camps in the Ivory Coast and Ghana. The United Nations provided Ghana funds to purchase only land for the refugee camp. No other assistance was provided. Refugees' relatives in Europe and America were expected to send money for food and basic essentials. "It was hard to survive, to find food and a place to sleep," said Paul. "We were not allowed to work. You came to appreciate a glass of water when it was available."

When asked what he learned from his experiences Paul responded, "I learned how horrible war is and that human beings must learn to love one another. The refugee camps prepared our hearts to be open to God. Aside from God, there is no other hope." Paul leads his congregation, mostly Liberian immigrants, at River of Life Open Bible Church in Brooklyn Park, a suburb of Minneapolis.

Finding Hope and Tragedy in America

Ivon and her sister, Janet,* both fled Liberia's civil war. One day when Janet was at the market, fighting broke out. She was forced to run for her life, leaving behind her husband



Ivon (left) and Janet with Ivon's children, Richmond and Pauline

and five children. She escaped to the countryside and eventually to the Ivory Coast, walking for a week and sleeping in the bushes. Her husband was killed in the fighting, though she didn't learn about his death until years later. She spent the next ten years in a refugee camp.

Janet didn't know that Ivon was also in a refugee camp in the Ivory Coast. The sisters didn't meet until the United Nations prepared them to be relocated. You can imagine their surprise and delight when they were reunited. They were not told where they would be sent or if they would be together; however, both were sent to the United States - Janet to Atlanta and Ivon to Des Moines. In September 2007 Ivon was in a terrible auto accident on her way to work. Thrown from the vehicle she was paralyzed from the neck down. She has two lovely children, Richmond, age 9, and Pauline, age 4. Though Janet had not seen her own children since she fled Liberia in 1997, she moved to Des Moines to assist Ivon and her children. Janet is saving money, hoping to bring her children to the U.S. Their faith in the Lord sustains them.

*last names withheld



Stephen and Odelta Cole

The Far Reach of the River Cess Mission Station

Stephen Cole came to the United States from Liberia 12 years ago with a temporary protective status visa. Paul Canfield met Stephen at the Liberian Ministers Association meeting in Minneapolis in June 2008. After the meeting, Stephen approached Paul and said, "You don't know me but I've heard your name in Liberia."

Stephen had heard the gospel from Open Bible missionaries at the River Cess Mission Station, where his two brothers attended school. "As a boy, I used to cut the grass on the mission station for Ethel Brunhaver for five cents an hour," he said. "She always had a stalk of bananas outside her house and I would ask her for a banana."

Stephen and his wife pastor an independent church in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota, called Christ Triumph Outreach Ministries. They minister to African immigrants, most of whom know firsthand the ravishes of war. The Coles have three children and are deeply grateful to live and minister in the United States.