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THE BIBLICAL ROLE OF THE OUTSIDER
Breastfeeding was out. Milk powder was in. At least in our slum.

Our neighbors had all seen the flashy TV ads for milk powder and had come to believe that their children would be smarter, fatter, and healthier with milk powder. The only problem was that our community, like slums all across the world, didn’t have easy access to clean drinking water.¹ A lot of the young mothers would mix up a bottle of expensive milk powder using dirty water and their babies would soon be miserable with diarrhea. Sadly, many of these babies would soon die of dehydration, malnutrition and other complications.²

When Nay became pregnant with our second child, Micah, we realized we had a great opportunity. Living “incarnationally” in the slum, meant our lives were under constant scrutiny.

While eating breakfast with neighbors in our lane, conversation came around to why Nay was breastfeeding our newborn baby girl. The local women were aghast when Nay told them that Micah was exclusively breastfed without supplementing her feeding with milk powder or other foods. They badgered her with questions, but their queries soon gave way to curiosity and then fascination. The months passed, and before their watchful eyes, our daughter grew into a huge, healthy butterball of a baby.

Because we lived incarnationally among the poor in this community, everyone knew that Micah had been fed nothing but breast milk for the first six months of her life and the local mothers were more than persuaded.

From that point onwards the use of milk powder in our slum decreased. Through the simple, prophetic act of incarnational cross-cultural motherhood, we accomplished in our slum what poster campaigns, visiting educators and government campaigns had been unable to accomplish - transformation.³ Life!

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¹ 1 billion people worldwide lack access to clean drinking water according to UNICEF (http://www.nesc.wvu.edu/ndwc/articles/OT/FA06/OT_FI_06_NNweb.pdf)
² Diarrhea and the resulting dehydration are responsible for about two million child deaths every year across the world.
³ At the same time, a good friend and co-worker, Dr Susan Jack, was working with other NGO’s to advocate a change of law that would mean milk powder companies could no longer advertise. This law was passed in 2006. A good example of the partnership between grassroots micro level mission and a more policy-level macro approach.
John Perkins suggests that three types of people are needed to see real transformation of an urban neighborhood:

1. Firstly, and most importantly, are the "Remainers." These are the ones that could have fled the problems of the neighborhood but have chosen to stay and be part of the solution to the problems surrounding them.

2. Then, the "Returners" who were born and raised in the community and left for a better life, to study or to work. They are no longer trapped by the poverty of their neighborhood, yet they choose to return and live in the community they once tried to escape.

3. Finally, "Relocators" are those people who were not born in the neighborhood but move into the community, sometimes cross-culturally, to tie their wellbeing to that of their neighbors.

Although John was talking about inner city U.S.A., this is a very helpful framework for thinking about international ministry. In the next section, I will unpack each of these roles but first we need to acknowledge some of the reasons we have lost confidence in the role of Outsiders (Relocators).

As the church has gained a deeper appreciation for the contribution the poor can make in reaching their own people and rebuilding their own communities as Remainers, I have observed some churches feeling an uneasiness about what we as Westerners might have to offer as long term cross-cultural Relocators amongst the poor.

The roots of this insecurity are complex. Partly it is a natural reaction against wrong emphases in the past. Yet somehow we must avoid the theological equivalent of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. So, I want to briefly survey four important reasons why we might have lost some of our confidence in long term cross-cultural missions as well as briefly offer a response to each:

**1. We have rightly recognized the importance of language and cultural understanding**

We cringe today at the colonial excesses carried out under the banner of “king and country”, yoking missions with imperialism, crushing local cultures condescendingly, and sneering at local customs and tongues. The correction of this sinful attitude was a long time coming (as is still coming!) But to lovingly
lift up one culture it is not necessary to devalue everything that outsiders have to offer. The answer is to approach missions with humility and grace, seeking to repent, learn and listen first. Then serve, rather than overpower.

2. We confuse empowerment with disengagement

The concept of empowering people is central to good ministry and community development work. But it takes wisdom to discern the difference between empowerment and disengagement. Just as a good manager of people will know just how much to delegate and how much support to provide, so does a foreign worker need to learn how to empower rather than overpower. But not showing up at all is not empowerment, it is apathy. Empowerment starts with true partnership.

3. We have only partially embraced a theology of “from every nation to every nation”

It is a beautiful and exciting thing to see African, Asian and Latino missionaries spreading out across the globe, and there is much more that can be done to assist and support them. But when Jesus told us to go into all the world and make disciples, he wasn’t letting any nation off the hook as though their contribution was not worthy or useful. We must get alongside our brothers and sisters from around the world and joyfully do our part in the great commission.

My former Vancouver-based pastor, Emmanuel, came to North America 8 years ago as a refugee fleeing war in Burundi. Emmanuel was so poor when he arrived that he faced homelessness. But God brought him to one of our church ministries, a transition home which provides space for refugees to find their feet. Before long Emmanuel became an integral part of our church. And the rest is history.

Does Emmanuel, as an outsider, have an important role to play in building God’s Kingdom in North America?

Yes! In fact, I believe that while local believers will always be central to God’s Kingdom purposes, every place on earth desperately needs prophetic outsiders who will bring an alternative perspective. Every culture and society (including North American culture) has its major blind spots that can only be identified and challenged by outsiders, who called by God, will come in humility and courage.

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4 In some ways the Biblical role of the prophet is always to be an “outsider” rejected by the community (Lk 4:24). These two roles are intricately bound up together.
4. We have been seduced by corporate thinking about return on investment

A common pitfall is to base our arguments solely on pragmatic or economic concerns, rather than theological foundations. In our relentless drive to get more bang for our buck, we realize we can "get" 10 local evangelists for the price of one Western missionary.

Jonathan Bonk in his challenging book, *Missions and Money* correctly points out that Western missionaries have for too long lived at a level high above the local people, so there is some truth in this critique. For this reason and others, missionaries sent out to the megacities of Asia by *Servants to Asia’s Urban Poor* and other *New Friars* style mission groups live simply in the slums alongside local people.

But we must be careful not to reinterpret God’s call to missions through a simplistic financial lens. This way of prioritizing economics above calling is a uniquely Western bias and an unbiblical one at that. For more on this issue, I highly recommend Scott Bessenecker’s book, *Overturning Tables: Freeing Missions from the Christian-Industrial Complex* (IVP, 2014).
Towards a more Inclusive Perspective

I want to suggest that for these reasons and many more, the missions pendulum has swung heavily towards resourcing local people (*Remainers*) - supplemented by short term missionaries who focus on transferring their skills without learning the language and culture. But we must strive to find balance by remembering the rich Biblical tradition of prophetic outsiders – which includes both *Relocators* and *Returners*. Throughout Biblical and recent history, God has used outsiders to bring about his purposes in foreign nations. So, let’s take a look at these three roles in more depth:

1. **REMAINERS:** Men and Women of Peace

To understand the role of the *outsider* we need first to understand and appreciate the role of the *insider*.

So this story starts not with us, the privileged minority who read English and have access to books like this, but with those who were born and have lived their whole lives in the slums and impoverished communities of the majority world.\(^5\)

The Remainers may never write books, speak at conferences or enjoy the applause of the wider world, but they are truly great in God’s eyes and play an important role in transforming their own communities. Though even their own societies may relegate them to the margins, these are the very people who are central to the Kingdom work God is doing in any place.

So, we start here with the *Remainers*.

These are the men and women of peace Jesus asked his disciples to look for in Luke 10, those we know will be central to whatever it is God is already doing in that place, and who will be there long after most outsiders have gone. The calling of these men and women of peace is to the place they already inhabit.

Jesus commanded the healed demoniac to return home and witness to his own family and neighbors. Like this man, most who have received God’s healing touch are called to remain in their own communities in order to pass on the good news to their old friends.

The *Alongsiders* movement is based on this vision of seeing young Christians across the developing world equipped to reach out and walk alongside vulnerable children *in their own communities*. It is truly a movement of the poor, for the poor...

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\(^5\) Many of the latest Christian books and articles lead us to a radical lifestyle, but when we look closer, we realize that they assume the readers come from a privileged context. Their market is middle and upper class Christians, and their language leaves poor people somewhere other than at the core of what God is doing.
When we first moved into a Cambodian slum many years ago, our hearts were broken for the children being orphaned by AIDS. But as we grew close to many of these children, we became frustrated that we could personally only reach a handful of children with the type of intense nurture, love, coaching, encouragement, mentoring and discipleship that would transform their lives.

We began to pray for a movement of young Cambodian Christians to rise up from within the national church to reach the tens of thousands of marginalized children all across the country. This movement would be entirely reliant on the work of the Spirit in people’s hearts, rather than financial incentives. And it would not be led by outsiders, but truly be a movement of Remainers helping their own neighbors.

The movement started with just ten young Cambodian Christians. We made lots of mistakes and made even more changes over the years. But gradually, by God’s grace, together with local leaders we began to identify the keys to seeing such an insider movement take hold and last the distance.

Today, hundreds of young local Christians faithfully walk alongside one vulnerable child each in their own communities, and the movement has spread into nine provinces of Cambodia, as well as into India, Indonesia, Pakistan and beyond. One generation is being equipped to reach the next.

And the first group of "little brothers and sisters"? Most are now in their early 20's, and they choose to become Remainers themselves – by becoming leaders in their churches and communities, as well as Alongsider mentors too.

This is the vision God gives for Remainers in Ezekial 37. God asks the prophet Ezekiel what he sees, and Ezekiel describes a valley of dry bones. A place of death. A valley of destruction. These words closely echo the descriptions many locals give to the impoverished neighborhoods I have lived in, whether the original Skid Row in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside or the slums of Asia.

Many see these places as drug-infested hell-holes with no hope of change or transformation. But God corrects that perception. He says, “You see dry bones, but I see a vast army!” And that is what we have asked him to give us eyes to see in our neighborhoods. To see Remainers as God sees them.

The Apostle Paul advises, “Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. Even if you can gain your freedom make use of your present condition now more than ever ... In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, there remain with God.”

Some describe their call to remain as a call to embrace the discipline of stability, especially in the face of either persecution or attractive opportunities to move up and out. Jesus himself remained rooted in one place for his first thirty years and he knew what it was like to be a Remain, choosing as the Creator of

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6 I Cor. 7:21,24
the universe to abide with us, despite our constant rejection of God and his Kingdom. He also knew firsthand the heartbreak of being rejected by his own people saying, “A prophet is not accepted in his hometown.” 7 This is one of the many costs of being a Remainer.

2. RETURNERS: Wounded Healers

_Returners_ are insiders, who have left to pursue work or education and then come back.

Moses was a _Returner_ - though ethnically the same as the people he was leading, he was in every other way a complete outsider. His name was foreign (it comes from the Egyptian word “mos” which means child), he couldn’t speak their language well (Aaron was his interpreter), he dressed funny, and he looked different.8 Sounds like a few missionaries I know! Yet God chose to use Moses to lead the Hebrews to their promised place.

Other _Returners_ in the Bible include Nehemiah, the _High-Powered Government-Sanctioned Returner_; Naomi, the _Low-Powered Refugee Returner_; and Ezra, the _Theologian-Returner_.

The _Returner_ narrative echoes in the story of my wife...

Nay was born in Cambodia and survived four years under the communist Khmer Rouge regime. Her father was the captain of the military police and her mother ran a café. Shortly after Nay was born and her mother was pregnant with her brother, the Khmer Rouge led by Pol Pot, took over Cambodia and slaughtered hundreds of thousands of people, starting with the middle class, educated people of the nation. Pol Pot and his Communist cohorts were determined to take Cambodia back to Year Zero where everyone would be peasant farmers. During this time, Nay’s family was separated. Her father and other men went off to fight, most never returning. Women and children were sent to backbreaking labor in the fields.

Nay was too young to work in the fields, so she was left in the house with her one year old brother while her aunt and mother went to work. During those years, Nay was malnourished and suffered skin problems associated with extreme poverty - boils and scabies. At times they moved from village to village in order to find food or to keep safe distances from soldiers.

Nay was five when her mother decided they had to try to escape. If they had stayed, Nay would have been forced to work in a children’s work gang alongside the adults. So Nay’s mother paid a fertilizer truck driver to take them close to the Thai border. Then they trekked through the landmine infested jungle,

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7 Luke 4:24
8 Exodus 2:19
eventually reaching a refugee camp in Thailand. After months on the move, they ultimately settled in New Zealand.

As Nay grew up, her desire was to serve God in whatever way He planned. There was always a longing to go back to the land of her birth and serve her own people. When she returned later to live in the slums of Phnom Penh as a member of the Servants Cambodia team, her Khmer language was rusty and our neighbors thought she must be Japanese or Korean – anything but Cambodian! But God used Nay to befriend and lead many young women out of prostitution into his promised place for them.

God is in the business of calling people to return. And throughout history he has used these Returners, alongside Remainders and Relocators, to accomplish his Kingdom purposes.

According to Nay, being a Returner is not like being a Relocator, “You are a curious mix of insider and outsider.” Nay takes comfort from Jesus’ experience as a Returner. In Luke chapter 4, Jesus “returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee... [and] he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up.” In this encounter with his own people, there was a mixture of wonder and anger, awe and irritation – a common experience for Returners. At one point, the people among whom Jesus had grown up scratched their heads in disbelief saying, “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?”

For Returners, it is often family relationships that are the most complex. There is a certain loss and grief for Nay’s mother, who has sacrificed so many of her hopes and dreams of who Nay would become. In trying to understand Nay’s decision to go back to Cambodia to live in the slums, her mother sobbed, “Why have I brought you out of Cambodia, and worked so hard so that you would be educated just for you to throw that all away and go back there?” Nay’s family desires to protect her from harm, from the poverty and hardship they have experienced. In choosing to return, unlike most missionaries, there is fear of the known, rather than a fear of the unknown.

In a hierarchical patron-client society, people are often confused about where in the hierarchy a Returner should fit. And with that outsider’s perspective Nay can ask questions of them like, “Why is there a hierarchy at all?” Returners will often have the privilege to challenge the status quo, break the rules, and confront the cycles that hold so many people in poverty, pointing their own people to another way.

Despite the difficulties, each of us must answer the call of God for ourselves, not our parents. Imagine if Chinese-Australians, Korean-Americans or Indo-Canadians answered God’s call in droves to serve God as returners in the nations of their ancestors. Most of us have the ability as Returners to move right into the community, under the radar of local authorities, modeling the kind of downward mobility Jesus taught and-incarnating the gospel among our own people.

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9 Likewise in John 1:11 “He came to his own but his own did not receive him.”
In the words of Isaiah the Prophet: “They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.”

3. **RELOCATORS: Bridge Builders**

We know that insiders can usually communicate the gospel more clearly and potentially carry out community development more cheaply than outsiders. The foreigner then, it is argued, should be merely a technical advisor, staying in country for as short a time as possible with the sole aim of imparting the expertise necessary (and then leaving quickly so as not to waste more resources).

But the idea that *Remainers* - such as evangelists or community development workers - can be trained and empowered in a vacuum, simply by a sterile skill transfer or “brain dump” is naïve in the extreme. If there is one thing I have learned to be true among the poor, it is this: **the medium is the message**.

In reality, our neighbors, staff and friends pick up much more from us than just the technical knowledge they are being offered. If a trainer isolates himself from the poor by living apart, the trainee will see no reason to suffer alongside the poor when he is no longer forced to by material circumstance. He will follow our lead in placing comfort before relationship. However, if the outsider demonstrates the importance of living incarnationally amongst the people, not isolating themselves but embracing a life among them, then those who watch our whole lives (such as our co-workers) will pick up the same attitude.

Ruth was an outsider, a *Relocator* that God used to accomplish his kingdom purposes in a foreign land. She turned up in Israel so poor that her first year in town she was forced to scavenge leftovers. The point stressed most frequently in the story is that Ruth was a foreigner. Still, Ruth the outsider came to share in the salvation and heritage of Israel.

Other *Relocators* in the Bible include Jonah, the *Reluctant Relocator*; Paul, the *Serial Relocator*; Daniel, the *Youthful Relocator*; Joseph the *Upwardly-Mobile Relocator*; Esther, the *Beauty Queen Relocator*; and many more. There is a huge Biblical precedent for God’s desire to use outsiders.

Of the thousands of missionary examples I could give, perhaps the most well-known is a young Englishman named Patrick, who God used to spread the gospel throughout Ireland. Patrick *relocated* to Ireland and learned the culture and language. St Patrick’s methods were incarnational and highly

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10 Isaiah 61:4
11 Ruth 1:4,22; 2:2,6,10-13,21; 4:5,10
creative as he sought to contextualize the gospel (he described the trinity by referring to a shamrock, the three-leafed clover so beloved by the local people).

And of course, Jesus chose to model this way himself, by relocating from the most exclusive gated community in the universe to live amongst us, embracing the culture of the time, and walking alongside us in all our messiness. And he prayed that we would follow his footsteps into the world.¹²

**Step 1. Building Trust**

We begin developing trust and relationships by moving into a neighborhood and sharing in people’s lives. Bonding, a critical factor in building trust, typically occurs best in times of suffering such as fires and floods, funerals and sicknesses. These can only truly be experienced by living alongside people and experiencing some of their suffering.

In our first slum, which flooded regularly, we experienced the smiles and friendly waves of people as we waded with them through soup-like water, and we realized that an important bond was being formed as we went through these hardships together. They considered us true neighbors, since we shared in their hardships.

By spending time with poor friends and making ourselves vulnerable to experience the same difficulties, members of our communities are effectively “walking a mile in their shoes.” We gain credibility when our neighbors see that we have tied our wellbeing to theirs, and they are much more receptive to our ideas. More importantly perhaps, they are more likely to offer their own ideas - especially casually – and more likely to tell us why a particular initiative might or might not work. They are also more likely to relate to us on the basis of friendship rather than as client to patron.

By choosing to return, remain or relocate to a poor community and build a friendship network there, we send a message that we value the people and the community, not just as a place to “do development or missionary work” but to live. In this way, trust is earned.

¹² John 17:18
**Step 2. Developing Understanding**

Spending time living in a cross-cultural situation inevitably results in increased time listening to community members, counteracting the tendency to reduce our neighbors to a formula or project. Time, combined with careful observation, leads to a deeper understanding of the reality of the poor:

"What on earth are you doing?" said I to the monkey when I saw him lift a fish from the water and place it on a tree.

"I'm saving it from drowning," was the reply\(^{13}\).

As Anthony De Mello implies in *Song of the Bird* above, unless we dedicate ourselves to relocating and humbly learning, we run the risk of acting like monkeys rescuing fish from water, operating out of our own understanding and context rather than the reality of an urban poor community. Where you stand truly does determine what you see.

Instead of dehumanizing our poor neighbors by seeing them merely as beneficiaries of our projects, or considering them clients or targets, we get to know them as people. They are not statistics to us, or even the “face of the poor,” but mothers and fathers and children. When this level of relationship occurs, our commitment to their welfare becomes stronger. It is one thing to know the AIDS statistics, it is another to watch your friend and neighbor die of AIDS. We have found that this can be very motivating – a compelling drive develops to do something about the issue, because it has affected you personally. Initiatives are likely to be given a lot more thought when they affect your closest friends and neighbors.

Relocating into the community allows us to observe and interact with the neighbors at a variety of different times of day and year in a way that a nine-to-fiver never could. We noticed how many people are missing from the community during working hours as they leave the community to earn a living. Seasonal occurrences such as monsoon rains make the community inaccessible to non-residents during certain months. There are benefits too in language learning that takes place immersed in the community rather than in a classroom, making forays into the community from the outside.

All this learning results in smarter, more thoughtful and informed work for transformation.

\(^{13}\) Anthony de Mello’s *Song of the Bird*
Step 3. Bridge Building through Creativity

Outsiders play a unique bridge building role. And never more so than when they tap into the divine spark of creativity that God has placed within them to communicate new perspectives to both the poor community they now live in, and the rich community they came from.

Artists have generally been undervalued in mission work (even more in community development). Yet poets, storytellers, writers and painters have historically played an essential role in activism and communication of God’s heart for the poor – as well as amplifying the voices of the marginalized.

Our God is a creative God and by allowing our senses, our imaginations, our minds and bodies to fulfill their God-given potential for creativity, we glorify our Creator. Not only this, but God expects us to use these gifts for greater kingdom purposes.

An artist’s work is always informed by their experience. So, in order to speak up with credibility and insight on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves the artist who feels called to communicate God’s heart for the poor must first learn the joys and struggles of the poor by living amongst them. As one critic remarked, “You say you care about the poor? Tell me their names.”

God has often called us to the role of bridge-makers between poor and rich. Though not much of an artist in the traditional sense, I have seen the power of writing, informed by experience, to move minds and hearts towards God’s agenda and I have tried to use this tool, albeit clumsily.

In the days after the massive Asian tsunami took the lives of a quarter of a million people, I was working in Thailand in a makeshift morgue. I helped Thai workers carry the bodies of their drowned family members from the beach. It was an intense experience and I felt moved to write my thoughts in an email which later became a magazine article. People wrote to me from all over the world, impacted by my words and wanting to know how they could help. My organization ended up working long term amongst tsunami survivors in Banda Aceh, and now in Jakarta, and great resources have been mobilized to make a difference in those communities.

Creativity is just one way that outsiders can bridge the gap between rich and poor. Each of us will have a different calling and gift to offer. The point is, God can and does call and use outsiders, whatever their gifting, to bring about the transformation He desires. The only question is, are we ready and willing?
It is time for the church to regain our confidence in all three approaches to transformational mission: to encourage, equip and support the Remainers, mobilize the Returners and celebrate the Relocators.

From Moses, a cultural outsider with poor language skills who led the people of Israel to freedom, to Ruth, an economic refugee who shared in the heritage and salvation of Israel. From Jonah, who saw the conversion of an entire city, to St Patrick who helped in the transformation of an entire nation. There is no doubt about it. God uses outsiders.

The words of Viv Grigg continue to ring true, "In the next few years, there needs to be an ever-growing stream, a new thrust to these dirt-and-plywood jungles. We need bands of people who, on fire with the message of Christ's upside-down kingdom, will choose a lifestyle of simplicity to bring that kingdom amongst the poorest of the poor."

Now, let us go and do likewise.

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About the author

Craig Greenfield is an outsider who helps insiders become alongsiders. As the founder and director of Alongsiders International, Craig facilitates the growth of this discipleship movement in multiple countries in Asia, Africa and beyond. He is the author of The Urban Halo: a story of hope for orphans of the poor (Authentic Media, 2007). In 2016, Craig's second book, Subversive Jesus, will be published by Zondervan (Harper Collins). You can write to Craig here: craig@alongsiders.org.