



## Listening to Immigrant Voices Being Hosted as Guests

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Except for Native Americans, we are all immigrants in this country. My ancestors came from Norway and Germany initially; the most recent was my grandfather who came to the United States from Sweden at the age of 17. My wife's ancestral homes are in northern Germany, Norway, and Sweden.

An "immigrant" is defined as: "a person who comes to a country to take up permanent residence." Given that definition, I believe I have insight into what it means to be the "foreigner," the "outsider," or the "stranger," while living in a host country. My wife and I lived in France for a year to study French. We were not "immigrants," however, because we were not going to live there permanently. We then moved to the Central African Republic (CAR), where our family lived for fifteen years, but again, not as immigrants but as guests of the church of that country.

It is important to note that when one lives in a country which is not their own, they enter a new culture. "Culture deals with everything that is a part of the system people have developed for their living. Their style of life and their attitude towards it become an integral part of culture. How people view reality, language, tradition, custom, belief, religion and all else is involved within this particular system which they have designed, or more accurately, inherited as their way of life."<sup>1</sup>

When one immigrates to a new culture, one brings along their own traditions and customs. However, entering into a new culture does not mean forsaking the former culture. As descendants of Scandinavian immigrants, we still have lefsa at holidays. How many Lutheran churches still have lutefisk and lefsa dinners? How many years ago was it that Lutherans stopped worshipping in German, Norwegian, Swedish, or Danish?

Our original cultures are still important to us. One of the most important things about a culture is our traditional cuisine. We have numerous kinds of ethnic restaurants in this country, and we enjoy that aspect of the individuals from other cultures who share that gift with us.

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culture is the language. Unless one has learned a new language, one does not realize how difficult that task. We should not criticize others who have moved here, who are yet unable to speak English. Upon entering a new culture and dealing with a new language, one realizes that, as the guest (or immigrant), you cannot change the culture but must adapt to it.

I realize that there is a big difference between our entering the CAR as guests and the people who come as immigrants to the U.S. today. As Caucasians, we were in the minority in CAR. However, we were the "privileged minority." We had a vehicle. We had access to health care, education, and enough money to provide well for ourselves. We had not fled an oppressive situation and were able to frequently return to our home country.

These cultural differences became clear to us many, many times while we were in CAR. I once had a Central African friend say to me: "When your children get sick, they get evacuated. When our children get sick, they die."

One day I asked the president of the church about our modest mission housing: "Mr. President, how do the people feel about the fact that we live in better housing than anyone else?" His response was: "Pastor, it is not a question of the kind of house you live in, but whether or not your door is open."

This points to one of the great biblical themes—hospitality. Having been the "foreigner" in other countries, we have seen how

1. Olin Sletto. "The Impact of Cultural Dynamics on Evangelism in the Gbaya Context," Master of Theology Thesis (St. Paul, Minn.: Luther Seminary, 1988), 5-6.

the way one is treated by the host country is critical to how you feel about the country you are in. The French were not very friendly to us until we had gained some knowledge of their language and could speak French with them. The Gbaya people, on the other hand, showed us great hospitality. We were guests in their land and they treated us as such. We tried to be hospitable from our own perspective as well. We ate whatever was placed before us. When they had no food, we also had no food.

This raises the question about how we—all of us immigrants at some point in our history—treat others who have come to this country, looking to find the same thing our ancestors were seeking. What kind of hosts are we? Do we accept cultural differences? Do we appreciate how difficult it is to learn English? Do we understand how we all have brought with us our own cultural background? Do we understand that immigrants today are no different than they have been through all of history?

As one who has been the outsider, the stranger, the most important thing to me was the acceptance and welcome of my hosts. Are we, as a society, doing our best to host those who come to us from danger, violence, and fear? As immigrants ourselves, we are charged with being welcoming hosts for other immigrants. We are to provide safety, health care, education, and an adequate living.

I once stood next to a man wearing a t-shirt that said, “This is *my* country. You don’t like it, I’ll help you pack.” I had to walk

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away before I asked the question: “And what country did *your* family come from?”

As a country of immigrants and excepting the indigenous people of this land, God is calling us to welcome the stranger. God is calling us to share. God is calling us to provide health care, education, and safety. God is calling us to be hospitable, and to host well.

## A poetical reflection

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Olin K. Sletto

**W**hen my wife, Connie, and I arrived in the CAR in 1974 to serve as missionaries, the infant mortality rate was such that 50% of the children died before the age of 2 years. We witnessed indescribable suffering with children who died of nothing other than diarrhea. When called upon to bury the children, it was heart wrenching because many times the family had already suffered the loss of many other children.

I wanted to try to explain the plight of the children in a way that others who have never seen such suffering might be able to understand. Sitting on our patio in a suburb of Chicago, I watched the sparrows flying around, which was the inspiration for the following poem.

### Where Do Sparrows Die?

Flitting from here and there, they come  
to sit and chat, sometimes sing.  
Yet always digging, seeking the next morsel  
they stop here and there.

Where do sparrows die?

One sparrow looks like another,  
as they swarm in groups together.  
They are so small, so fragile,  
being in community gives security.

Where do sparrows die?

If one sparrow is missing,  
does anyone notice?  
There are so many, one little sparrow  
makes little difference.

Where do sparrows die?

Does anyone see when there is no food?  
Does anyone see when it is sick?  
Does anyone see the lifeless body?  
Does a sparrow make any difference?

Where do sparrows die?

Who weeps over a lost sparrow?  
There are so many, no difference.  
Who holds the dying sparrow?  
Who knows when it is gone?

Where do sparrows die?

Children of Africa are like sparrows.

Flitting from here and there, they come  
to sit and chat, sometimes sing.  
Yet always digging, seeking the next morsel  
they stop here and there.

Where do the children of Africa die?

One African child looks like another,  
as they swarm in groups together.  
They are small, so fragile,  
being community gives security.

Where do the children of Africa die?

If one child is missing,  
does anyone notice?  
There are so many,  
one little child makes little difference.

Where do the children of Africa die?

Does anyone see when there is no food?  
Does anyone see when it is sick?  
Does anyone see the lifeless body?  
Does a child make any difference?

Where do the children of Africa die?

Who weeps over an African child?  
There are so many, no difference.  
Who holds the dying child?  
Who knows when it is gone?

Where do the children of Africa die?

“So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.” Matthew 10:31