Promoting Dignity, Community, and Reconciliation Among Refugees Through Diverse Musical Expression

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ABSTRACT

This paper will look briefly into the role that music is playing in cross-cultural and missionary encounters with refugees and asylum-seekers. As large-scale calamities continue to force an exponentially increasing percentage of the world’s population into displacement and exile, creative expressions, such as music, often are employed to establish connectedness, build friendships, and convey hospitality in ways that are surprising. Though the context for my work and reflection is the North Jutland Peninsula of Denmark, this paper hopefully will provide some insight into how the juxtaposition of applied missiology and music can be fruitful in a variety of cultural settings.
During the past half decade the number of refugees and internally displaced persons in the world has reached levels beyond anything previously recorded in human history. The 2015 World Refugee Survey estimates that 59.5 million people have been uprooted due to war and human rights atrocities, half of which are children. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres quoted: “We are witnessing a paradigm change, an unchecked slide into an era in which the scale of global forced displacement as well as the response required is now clearly dwarfing anything we have seen before.”

Considering the fact that estimates around the turn of the century were around 14 million, the projectile is staggering (Lewis 2004:1).

The primary source of turmoil in recent years can be traced to the outbreak of civil war in Syria, further complicated by the menacing intrusion of ISIS. During this timeframe 11 million Syrians either have been killed or forced to flee, which constitutes roughly half of the pre-war population. The majority of those who have fled have sought refuge in the neighboring countries of Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. However, a majority of the headlines in the Western world have focused on the more than 1 million Syrians who have crossed borders into Europe, seeking asylum among Western populations struggling to come to terms with this new reality. Harrowing accounts of boat-crossings across the Mediterranean and Red Seas exacerbate the level of tragedy, as bribes exchange hands and people are herded into precarious vessels built to accommodate only a small fraction of those who set sail for distant destinations such as Greece and Italy. A shocking CNN International news headline on Sunday May 29, 2016 indicates the horrific nature of the situation: “700 + migrants missing or feared dead in Mediterranean shipwrecks.”

Yet the crisis in Syria is not the only root cause of massive displacement. In Africa, military conflicts and ensuing humanitarian disasters have blemished the Ivory Coast, DR Congo, and Southern Sudan, and the onslaught of human rights violations in countries such as Eritrea and Somalia have forced many others into exile. In addition to the crises that have plagued parts of the Middle East, Asian countries such as Myanmar, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Burma and Afghanistan; South and Central American countries such as Columbia; and European countries such

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Promoting Dignity, Community, and Reconciliation Among Refugees as Ukraine combine to offer a bleak narrative regarding the current world order. The escalating toll on untold millions of lives has rendered the plight of refugees and the displaced as one of the defining issues of our time.

Throughout Europe and North America, the political repercussions have sometimes been extreme, leading to statements and positions that contradict the Judeo-Christian ethical foundation upon which the West arguably has been built. In light of the rising “backlash” against refugee migration into Europe and beyond, the need for clear missiological reflection and Christian response is critical. There is a compelling theological mandate for demonstrating hospitality to foreigners in need. Jesus clearly states that we are to welcome the stranger (Matthew 25:35), and the message likewise is reflected in several New Testament epistles (cf. Romans 12:13 and 15:7, Hebrews 13:2, and I Peter 4:9, among others). Empathizing with sojourners while remembering Israel’s past experiences of exodus and exile is thematic in the Old Testament (cf. Exodus 22:21, Leviticus 19:33 and 24:22, Deuteronomy 10:18, among many others). Even Jesus and his family were refugees in Egypt while fleeing the pogrom of King Herod (Matthew 2:13), thus implying an inherent Christian empathy for oppressed and disenfranchised people around the world.

Governments are understandably required to reflect sensible policies regarding economics and security; however, the larger ethical concerns involve the unleashing of xenophobia targeted against an already traumatized population. When the Danish government, for example, recently enacted a bill allowing for the confiscation of money and other valuables worth more than approximately $2,000, the “good Samaritan” efforts so characteristic of the actions of many Danes became undermined, thus fueling mutual mistrust and animosity. As other countries either close their borders or threaten to do so, the tension caused by the possibility of forced repatriation adds more anxiety to an already unbearable situation. Further marginalization and exclusion caused by residence in a foreign country – each with its own set of rules (written and unwritten), expectations, and moral assumptions – likewise poses a different set of challenges. While the Western media and government spokespersons employ terms such as “refugee crisis,” host populations

3 See http://jyllands-posten.dk/politik/ECE8313942/St%C3%B8jberg-efter-nazi-sammenligninger-Kun-rimeligt-at-tage-v%C3%A6rdier-fra-flygtninge, Jyllands Post December 12, 2015.
are enticed to think of it as their own “crisis,” precipitated by the deluge of foreigners overrunning their cultural territory. Missiological insights can challenge people to think and respond differently. In such an unstable environment, people from all backgrounds need to be informed about the inevitable tensions that occur when differing cultures and worldviews meet, in addition to related issues of culture shock, psychological trauma, ethnocentrism, and the like. As representatives of the Gospel of grace and compassion, Christians with a developed sensitivity toward multiculturalism and justice are needed in every sphere of society. One can affirm that missiology is uniquely positioned to promote understanding and reconciliation in light of the current crisis, by engendering a theology of hospitality towards “the least of these.”

Although the influx of displaced persons in the West can call for a wide variety of missiological responses, an overlooked yet obvious expression centers on the use of music and other artistic expressions. During the many refugee gatherings that take place throughout Denmark – whether in refugee centers, churches, schools, on pedestrian streets, etc. – people often will notice three elements that almost always are present: music, dance, and food! As much as anything else, music provides opportunities for cultural expression, learning, and even emotional catharsis. In my own experience as senior pastor, mission secretary, musician, and local teacher of adult courses in world religions and culture studies, I have had the opportunity to observe how the employment of music during varieties of cross-cultural events is about much more than entertainment. The indigenous music of the differing displaced populations provides a glimpse into the collective “heart” of their culture, and it facilitates opportunities for cultural exchange in ways that discursive communication often cannot match.

**Music as Therapy**

Since World War II, awareness of the medicinal value of music in treating victims of stress and depression has developed into a new discipline – music therapy. According to John Powell, it began simply as an attempt to bring comfort to traumatized war veterans, and grew as hospital staff began to realize the positive effects of music on the physical and mental well-being of their patients (Powell 2016:74). As musicians and musicologists became more involved in health care, a plethora of studies have emerged, which document the impact of music on
Promoting Dignity, Community, and Reconciliation Among Refugees the immune system, pain and even the reduction of symptoms from Parkinson’s disease (2016:74–80).  

Reflections by musicians working with refugees around the world likewise point to the therapeutic role of music. There is no shortage of published case studies, including work done among traumatized refugees, and a series of documentaries by journalist Alex Petrapoulos provides examples. Recounting life stories in the Zaatari refugee camp outside of Mafraq, Jordan, Petrapoulos summarizes that almost all songs and poems share a common theme: the longing for home (Petrapoulos 2016). In a series of short film clips about displaced Syrians residing in a camp with around 79,000 other residents, Petrapoulos suggests how songs provide a catharsis, thereby assisting in the process of healing from the inexpressible anguish experienced by most residents, as well as establishing a sense of connectedness with home. Most importantly, music helps them to maintain hope. In my own formal and informal conversations with Syrian refugees in Denmark, I have discovered that the desire to return home to a stable and rebuilding Syria is by far the strongest impulse. Since language imposes a formidable barrier (only a very small percentage can communicate adequately in English), music becomes the primary conduit for conveying their deepest emotions.

The nexus between music therapy and refugee outreach has received attention for several decades, as evidenced by a 1998 collection of essays, entitled Arts Therapist, Refugees and Migrants Reaching Across Borders. In one particular article, focus was given to treatment of traumatized Vietnamese refugees, many of whom had been diagnosed with serious mental disorders related to torture and violence. In their case, music therapy as “treatment” was employed to provide a median for expressing feelings such as homesickness, loneliness, and despair. Use of indigenous music was especially helpful due to language issues, since music can be used as a form of non-verbal communication. The familiarity of the music for refugee patients was also credited for enabling them to maintain their own cultural identity, creating opportunities for socially constructive interaction, and promoting a means of self-expression (Doktor 1998:82–83).

4 The relationship of music and health continues to be explored by medical professionals. An example is provided by a personal friend, Danish neurologist Peter Michael Nielsen, who has been given a sizable grant by the Danish government to fund a project dealing with the impact of tones, especially bass tones, on chronic pain relief and the process of healing.
Doktor, et al. once again remind the reader of the perilous plight of most displaced persons. One should, at any rate, not forget that their past events often are overwhelming. They have lost everything and are forced to rely on the charity of a foreign country. The onslaught of trauma and homelessness take a devastating toll on their emotional state. And fear and uncertainty reduce life to a matter of survival. Under these circumstances, the need to respect and acknowledge emotions such as longing, fear, anger, joy, grief, etc. becomes magnified. A therapeutic approach to music therefore should begin by seeking common ground in terms of feelings and experiences that may be shared collectively. Music (i.e., sound, rhythm, and melody) is uniquely capable of achieving this goal, even among some of the most introverted personalities (1998:84).

A related analysis is provided by Sarah Scroope and Rosemary Signorelli. As music therapists engaged in refugee work, they convey an understanding of the impact that music in general has in evoking expressions of personal emotions, as well as providing a context for celebrating family and community life. Scroope and Signorelli have utilized music to address the needs of refugees affected by war, violence, dispossession, and loss through a combination of listening, playing, writing, recording, movement, and dance (Scroope 2010:36). Their work at the time focused primarily on contact with Iraqi women and children from minority religious communities, who had fled to Australia. By teaching songs to preschoolers and their mothers, it became for them apparent how music can promote literacy and enhance child development (2010:36). Some of the sessions included popular and traditional music from Iraq, where all participants were encouraged to sing along. One of the advantages of music in cross-cultural settings is that it empowers participants by enabling them to use their own voices, thus deepening the sense of shared culture. As their work points out, energetic singing has physiological benefits by releasing endorphins, which in turn can reduce feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression (2010:36).

However, there are a couple of caveats to the use of music in therapeutic contexts. In one particular case, for example, music conjured traumatic memories in a boy from Sierra Leone, who witnessed the murder of his father to the sound of drumming (Doktor 1998:89). Since verbal communication is often exceedingly difficult, at least without the help of translators, it is difficult for practitioners to understand whether or not meaning constructions have become distorted due to
unspeakable circumstances. It is therefore incumbent upon those who employ music as therapy to be sensitive to the diversity of meanings, as well as the array of emotional and cognitive factors that may be present during such gatherings. In our own contact with large groups of refugees, we are challenged to remember that groups consist of individuals, who embody their own life experiences, thought processes, emotional makeup, and personality. In other words, it is important in our work to see each person as uniquely created in God’s image.

Nevertheless, as Scroope and Signorelli point out, contact with refugee children through musical exchange can reap many benefits. This is something to which a group from my own context enthusiastically can attest. In January 2016 members of an outreach committee from my local Methodist church acted on a suggestion that emerged in conversation with volunteer coordinators at a nearby refugee center. It involved initiating a bi-weekly playschool for pre-schoolers and their mothers, to be held at the center. The program quickly gained a good reputation, and has since served as a template for the establishment of similar programs in other centers. As one might imagine, music is a key component, with special emphasis on teaching basic Danish children’s songs that involve gestures and movement. As the primary leader sings songs about colors, animals, balloons, and other subjects with the aid of props (and occasional guitar accompaniment by her missiologist/pastor!), mothers often join in with their children. The success of the program relates in part to the nurturing of cognitive development in children; however, it has gained broad appeal, most likely because it provides an activity that breaks the monotony of life “on hold” in a refugee camp, while presenting a relaxed introduction to certain facets of Danish life and culture. In this way, such activities play a small role in helping to ameliorate the otherwise difficult process of integration into a foreign culture.

Music, Community, and Emotions

Quite often, people groups are encouraged to perform songs from their own background during cultural meetings. This is especially on display in migrant

5 Examples of these songs would include, ”The wheels on the bus go round and round” (in Danish) and several “good morning” songs. Though references to God in some songs are acceptable, leaders are careful not to reference “Jesus” or anything specific to Christianity, due to the interreligious composition of the group.
church settings, which have been most particularly effective in helping refugees, who have been granted asylum, to establish networks and find identity. Migrant congregations are unmistakably the fastest growing segment of the church in Denmark, and as one might imagine, music usually is “front and center” during worship and other public gatherings. Yet music can also be prominently featured during interreligious refugee events, sometimes with astounding results. A case in point took place in September 2014, when the local Lutheran church in my city of Strandby, Denmark, in cooperation with the Methodist church, co-hosted an event for 200 refugees. The largest groups at the time were from Syria, Eritrea, Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Before the meeting even took place, some of the hosts were concerned about religious conflicts. The majority of the “guests” were Muslims, and the meeting venue was the Folkekirke. Upon arrival, several of the visitors were seen unfurling their prayer rugs in the church’s parking lot (as many of us later joked, the church in Denmark needs all the prayer it can get!), while a number of the Christians lit candles in the church’s chapel. All concerns quickly dissipated as people greeted each other with smiles, hugs, and displays of gratitude. After the meal, a fellow pastor/musician and I taught the group a few easy to learn “spirituals,” after which a member of the Syrian group spontaneously shared a well-known song from his country. The song was downloaded onto his I-phone and we played it over the church’s sound system. As the “energetic” song was rhythmically booming out texts the rest of us could not understand, the majority of the refugees present, including many who were not from Syria, began to dance and move freely. The otherwise “subdued” Danish hosts joined in, and one could quickly observe that barriers were dissolved. Muslim women clad in hijabs and burkas were dancing with Danes, and people from all culture groups were united by a feeling of euphoria and community. The evening continued as representatives from each group chose songs from their national repertoire to share with the entire assembly, with similar results.

It is important to understand that music in itself is not “a universal language.” The combination of sound, rhythm, and melody, together with tonal inflections and nuances, instrumentation, and the like is inexorably linked to culture. In other words,

6 The Danish organization, KIT (Church’s Integration Service) exists to facilitate the migrant church movement and disseminate information. Cf. their website: http://www.kit-danmark.dk/dk/

7 Folkekirke is the National church, which is the Lutheran Church in Denmark and throughout most of Scandinavia.
musical expression is just as diverse as linguistics and culture. This means that Danish or Western music in general likely will not have the same emotional impact upon Syrian refugees, for example, as their own indigenous songs. Musicologists understand how scale patterns are arranged differently around the world, which in turn can evoke a variety of emotional responses. Even untrained listeners can “feel” the difference between an Arabic *maqam* and a common pentatonic scale in Western music. Since music appeals to affectivity and the non-rational dimension of human existence, it is exceedingly difficult to pinpoint the processes involved in listening, absorbing, and expressing a piece of music, which in all likelihood was created by a composer who was attempting to convey emotions to the listener. Does the source of feeling lie predominantly with the composer, the listener, the relationship between the two, outside factors, or a combination of these elements? People may differ in their perceptions and understanding of the overall impact of music on emotions (cf. Langer 1951 and Meyer 1968), but it is clear that culture plays a vital part.

On the larger subject of meaning in music, one could argue that it is referential and therefore not universally innate, even though there appears to be some consequences regarding music’s impact on the emotions in every cultural context (Meyer 1968:2) The study of musicology across boundaries of culture and ethnicity reveals a common thread in that music, generally speaking, has the intrinsic ability to charge the emotions in ways that little else can (cf. Powell 2016:31-50). That is a key to understanding how even “foreign” music, though maybe less effective in terms of emotional impact, can be a positive tool in building emotional consensus among diverse groups. Susanne Langer contemplated the impact of music on emotions, meaning construction, aesthetics, and the like more than a half century ago, and her words still resonate. In her book, *Philosophy in a New Key*, she explains why music should not be confused with other discursive forms of communication, and quotes:

> “Music is revealing, where words are obscuring, because it can have not only a content, but a transient play of contents… The assignment of meanings is a shifting, kaleidoscopic play, probably below the threshold of consciousness, certainly outside the pail of discursive

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8 As a field of study, ethnomusicology deals directly with the relationship of culture and music.
Music as Missiological Expression

Awareness of the construction of meaning in relation to music, the impact of culture, and the opportunities created for shared expression provide a segue to deeper metaphysical considerations about the source and impact of music – which brings us closer to the subject of missiology. The nexus between music and missiology is certainly ripe for further exploration. One can indeed ruminate at great length on the therapeutic advantages, as well as the overall effect of music on the emotions. However, from a theological perspective, we assert that music alludes to *transcendence*. Music, in the most ideal sense, can serve as a conduit that connects us to the Creator. A number of scholars have offered deep and thoughtful perspectives on the spiritual dimension of music and the arts, including Jeremy Begbie. In his book, *Voicing Creation’s Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts*, Begbie articulates how artistic expressions are woven into the fabric of the created universe, stating: “Human creativity is supremely about sharing through the Spirit in the creative purpose of the Father as he draws all things to himself through his Son” (1991:179). The historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, notably in his work, *Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts*, brought his insights to the subject by presenting an interpretation of reality that understands the symmetry between the sacred and the arts. Among other things, he proposed that art (including music) expresses the fundamental human instinct for transcendence (1986:xi-xii). This is, of course, open to interpretation, and there can be great value in deeply contemplating the connection between meaning construction and music. Yet the idea of transcendence in music, together with the emotional catharsis and connectedness that it offers, takes on a particular life in missional contexts, such as refugee work.

The transformative power of music in cross-cultural encounters was cogently expressed in a May 2016 interview with one of Denmark’s leading gospel music singers and choir directors, Sofie Hermind. Hermind recounted, among other things, her association with a refugee camp as music therapist. The energy that she described during many of the meetings was palatable. Residents were invited to take part in singing sessions in a “come-as-you-are” environment, and though not all participants demonstrated a particular talent for music, the experience
Promoting Dignity, Community, and Reconciliation Among Refugees created bonding, broke down barriers, and provided life-affirming impulses to hurting people. Hermind agreed that overtly Christian texts would not have been appropriate, given the constellation of religious backgrounds present at the camps, yet the experience of music in this setting for her was comparable to the ambiance of praise and worship that she regularly has helped to lead in gospel choir gatherings. The spiritual dimension was not lost on Hermind, not least because of the way it included and embraced all people in an atmosphere of love and grace, no matter one’s religious or cultural background.

In a number of the gatherings where I have taken part, we have often discussed the extent to which overt Christian texts could be used. During a municipal sponsored culture event entitled, “The Whole World in Frederikshavn” (the name of the city in Northern Denmark where the event took place), the gospel choir from my congregation took on the task of offering a makeshift gospel workshop for any that desired to take part. The songs were chosen carefully, even though we are very accustomed to the phenomenon of even the most secular Danes taking active part in gospel choirs (cf. Lewis 2010). Yet our concerns turned out to be exaggerated as participants expressed delight in singing along, as well as enjoying the opportunity to make new acquaintances. One of the highlights of the event came when the workshop choir led the entire audience in a rendition of “We Shall Overcome.” It seems that certain types of Christian music have the ability to legitimate God language in ways that are broadly appealing, for example, African American “Negro” Spirituals and African Gospel songs. This came to light during another occasion, when we were leading a large gathering in the song, “Siyahamba” (We Are Marching in the Light of God). After my music partner and I finished the “set,” informal conversations took place with some of the English-speaking refugees in attendance. One man in particular – a Sufi Muslim from Sudan who bore scars of torture and anguish – politely whispered to me: “My brother, I am trying to march in the light of God.” Such affirmations confirm that thoughts of God and the meaning of existence are eternally present. The potential for music to communicate God’s love and redeeming grace in cross-cultural encounters in ways that are respectful and non-intrusive can remind us that God likewise is present. From a missiological and

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9 Sofie Hermind is often in demand as a gospel music soloist, in addition to her work as leader of three Danish gospel choirs. Her work at the Sandholm Refugee Camp outside of Copenhagen uniquely qualifies her to contribute to the discourse on music, faith, and interculturalism.
theological perspective, we perhaps can begin to glimpse how the experience of music in such contexts can point to a larger interplay between the human and the divine. That is indeed what seems to be occurring in many of the events that involve meeting grounds where displaced people, multiculturalism, hospitality, spirituality, and music converge.
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