4. Finding Communitas in Liminality: Invitations from the Margins in the New Testament and in Contemporary Mission

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Migration has brought substantial and rapid demographic change to Aotearoa New Zealand. The most recent national census (2013) reveals that 25.2% of NZ's population, and 39.1% of residents of Auckland, NZ's largest city, were born overseas. For new migrant communities and more established local populations alike this changed landscape is experienced as a liminal space of discomfort, uncertainty and fear of loss, but also of potential for transformation. The narrative of Cornelius and Peter in Acts 10-11 illustrates the role of liminality and communitas in the transformation of the church that was necessary for it to participate in God's mission as it crossed new boundaries. What would be the possibilities of transformation for New Zealand's churches if we were to accept invitations from the new margins of immigration to enter liminal space and embrace the potential for change in communitas with those who are already there?

Migration and Liminality

The anthropologist Victor Turner is credited with taking up and developing the term *liminal* to describe the in-between state experienced by individuals or communities who have left behind one settled condition and have not yet entered into another.[1] This movement from separation through *limen* (Latin: threshold) to aggregation has proved fruitful in explicating processes of learning.[2] Liminality is characterised by disorientation, discomfort and a destabilising of the settled order. It is accordingly rich in potential for new orderings of experience and understanding, the emergence of new relationships and ways of being, indeed for transformation. Pastoral theologian Tim Carson describes it thus:

1 See e.g., Alan J. Roxburgh, *The Missionary Congregation, Leadership, and Liminality* (Harrisburg: Trinity, 1997), 23. Whereas the liminal state is usually assumed to be transitional, the experience and conditions of liminality may for some migrants become more permanent. On this see Caroline Wanjiku Kihato, "Migration, Gender and Urbanization in Johannesburg" (DPhil diss. University of South Africa, 2009), 18-19; accessible at http://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/2693

2 See e.g. Alison Cook-Sather and Zanny Alter, "What Is and What Can Be: How a Liminal Position Can Change Learning and Teaching in Higher Education," *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 42 (2011), 37-53.

> In the first phase of transition in the rites of passage, that of separation, there is a time of detachment and detaching from the earlier period, place or state in the cultural or social context. In the last phase of this process, the time of aggregation, there is a return to a stable position; one that is socially located but different from the former phase—a transformed, altered condition.[3]

Liminal space, then, is a uniquely fertile place of learning. Discomfort precedes discovery, and the trauma of separation and disorientation is the necessary precondition of re-orientation and transformation.

Liminality is an inescapable dimension of the migration experience. Migrants are, quite literally, "a people in-between."[4] Theirs is the "forced liminality" of those who enter a new context from its margins.[5] The dislocation and disruption of migration creates a degree of emergency but, as Homi K. Bhabha points out, "the state of emergency is also always a state of emergence."[6] This emergency and consequent emergence may be observed across the full range of attitudes, relationships and behaviours of migrant groups, including their religious practices, values and beliefs, and the life shared within their communities of faith.[7]

Gemma Tulud Cruz describes ways in which the structure of religious groups may be impacted, "as traditional leadership, rituals, and myths are challenged, and new types of worship, new sacred places, and new structures emerge when groups are confronted with migration."[8] Although there is a counter tendency to seek security in the new context by preserving forms and practices and looking back to the place of origin for spiritual nurture and the provision of religious leaders, migration inevitably precipitates change. Cruz continues:

3 Timothy L. Carson, "Liminal Reality and Transformational Power: Pastoral Interpretation and Method," *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 7 (1997), 99-112, 100-101.

4 Brij V. Lal, "People In-between: Reflections from the Indian Indentured Diaspora," in *Chinese and Indian Diasporas: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Siu-Lun Wong (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong, 2004), 69-83.

5 Sang Hyun Lee, "Pilgrimage and Home in the Wilderness of Marginality: Symbols and Context in Asian American Theology," in *Korean Americans and Their Religions: Pilgrims and Missionaries from a Different Shore*, eds. Ho-Youn Kwon, Chung Kim Kwang, and R. Stephen Warner (University Park, PA: Pensylvania State University Press, 2001), 55-69, 57.

6 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 41.

7 "Virtually every behavior in a person's repertoire is a candidate for change following one's involvement with other cultures." J.W. Berry, "A Psychology of Immigration," *Journal of Social Issues* 57 (2001), 615-31, 621.

8 Gemma Tulud Cruz, "Between Identity and Security: Theological Implications of Migration in the Context of Globalization," *Theological Studies* 69 (2008), 357-75, 365.

> Migration . . . is also likely to be among the most conspicuous agents of change of religious systems because it exposes migrants to new ideas, challenges the power of control and religion in their places of origin, and raises profound questions of community, personal identity, and affiliation.[9]

Liminality Observed: The Case of a Chinese Church in Auckland

This process may be illustrated from the recent experience of one church in Auckland that was established twenty-five years ago by immigrants from Hong Kong.[10] Tensions were surfacing between its first generation migrant members and some of the church's young people, comprising 1.5 and second generation migrants. Sunday School and Bible Study leaders were reporting difficult behaviour in their classes, and parents and church leaders feared that their young people would be lost to the church as they became more reluctant to participate in its services and activities.[11]

At first, language was assumed to be the problem. While most of the young people speak Chinese with their families at home, many have not learned all the characters necessary to read the Chinese Bible with any fluency, and prefer to use an English translation for Bible study. This creates difficulties when the mode of teaching requires students to report verbatim the words of the text, and accurate memorisation of Bible verses is valued. For a growing number of the young people it is also a struggle to comprehend preaching and teaching that utilises Chinese language above an everyday conversational level. The decision was therefore made to initiate an "English Ministry" specifically for the church's New Zealand educated young people. In parallel to the church's Chinese programs, a Sunday service, Bible study and discipleship classes and cell groups in English were launched.

This bold move was welcomed by many of the young people, but it did not resolve all the issues. In the pastor's words, "We realised that we were just giving them a Chinese service in English!" Teachers were still offended when students asked questions,

9 Cruz, "Between Identity and Security," 365-366.

10 Hong Kong is a context, incidentally, that Ross Langmead knew well, having spent much of his childhood there. Such experiences, with their liminal aspects, may well have helped to form the notable empathy that he displayed with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers as well as other people on the margins.

11 The fear expressed was not so much that the young people would abandon Christian faith as that they would leave the Chinese church and join school friends in local English speaking churches. It was deeply important to the Chinese parents and church leaders that families should remain together in the same church. There was also a lack of confidence in the formation that their young people might receive in "Kiwi churches." In several conversations with Chinese pastors in Auckland it has become evident that, from the perspective of Confucian cultures, youth programs that seem to emphasise entertainment at the expense of Bible teaching, and encourage young people to express their own opinions on ethical matters rather than accept clear instruction, appear quite inadequate.

spoke without being invited to, and offered their own ideas; the style of the English worship service, replicating exactly that of the Chinese service, was more formal than the young people seemed to prefer, and the preaching, though in English, retained a manner of authoritative instruction and exhortation that did not align with styles of discourse experienced by the young people in the educational and other contexts of their lives outside the church. The church leaders recognised that there were deeper cultural shifts that had to be taken into account.

Their response was to take steps to reorient their youth program towards a more intentional preparation for Christian life in New Zealand contexts, adapting their practices of formation to align more closely with the modes of learning and relating that the young people were being shaped by in New Zealand's education, leisure and work environments. Training was organised for youth leaders, potential pastors emerging within the church were encouraged to undertake theological and ministry training in New Zealand institutions, and teachers and preachers from outside their Chinese church networks were invited to contribute to the English services and youth training events.

The church's negotiation of this complex liminal terrain is on-going. For the older members, participation in the life of their church might represent a partial relief from the liminality of their everyday lives as migrants in a new context. Their children, however, experience that dual liminality of 1.5 and second generation migrants as they move through the week from the Chinese family home into the non-Chinese world of education and employment and then as they leave that world on Sunday and enter the very different environment of their Hong Kong church. At the same time, changes in the English program bring a new element of liminality into the experience of the majority Chinese congregation, particularly as young adults who have participated in the English program take their place in ministry and leadership in the church as a whole. Conversely, a tendency may be observed in the English service for young people who are given leadership roles to assume the style of dress and deportment nearer to that considered appropriate for leaders in the Chinese service.

And what of those guest speakers and trainers? Majority culture people who have accepted invitations from this Chinese church to participate in their English services and youth programs have also experienced liminality. Passing through the glass doors into the foyer of the custom-built worship centre on the outskirts of an otherwise unremarkable commercial and industrial district, they have found themselves abruptly

leaving behind the familiar sights, sounds and atmosphere of their customary Kiwi Sunday to join a self-consciously distinct migrant community in its liminal space at the margins of New Zealand society. They may be unsure how to interpret and receive the deferential treatment they are afforded as honoured guests, teachers or pastors; perhaps they suddenly feel self-conscious about their clothes (probably too casual?), or accent (they don't seem to have been understood), or gestures (should they have bowed their head when greeted? what was that about accepting something with both hands?) It may be disconcerting to find themselves to be the only non-Chinese among several hundred worshippers in the building, and unable to read signs directing members of the congregation to their various groups and activities.

More profoundly, as they enter into conversation, participate in small groups, or even listen to the church notices, they begin to appreciate that this migrant community faces significant challenges that have not been part of their own experience. It might be the financial vulnerability of migrants, or the tensions of living with sensitivity to family members who practice other religions, or pressures on young people who feel burdened by obligations to fulfil what seem impossibly high aspirations for academic and career success. They certainly feel discomfort as they begin to see their New Zealand churches through the eyes of migrants and recognise the validity of at least some of the perceptions of lack of enthusiasm for growth in spiritual understanding and life, indifference to matters of ethical and doctrinal importance, failure to welcome and make space in their churches and ministries for Christian believers who arrive from elsewhere, and unwillingness to adapt in order to enable their participation in local Christian communities.

Intercultural Engagement and Communitas

Even without such intentional relating, migration produces a state of liminality not only among migrant groups but also in the communities into which migrants arrive. In New Zealand the acceleration of immigration resulting from the passing of a new Immigration Act in 1987 has meant that for many New Zealand born people over the age of forty the country they now live in seems dramatically different to the more mono-cultural environments of their formative years.[12] They, too, experience a changed context and are confronted with difference in new ways or to greater degrees, provoking discomfort and a disordering of former norms. Though often resisted, that

12 See Andrew Butcher and George M. Wieland, "The New Asian Faces of Kiwi Christianity," in *Interrogating Multiculturalism in New Zealand: An Asian Studies Perspective*, eds. Jaqueline Leckie and Gautam Ghosh (Otago: Otago University Press, forthcoming).

liminality contains within it the potential for development and rejuvenation.[13] For New Zealand's churches, however, this is an opportunity that has scarcely begun to be embraced. Whereas increasing diversity is readily apparent in schools, the labour force and other public spaces, it must be admitted that in church congregations a much greater social and cultural homogeneity generally persists.[14]

What explains this lack of effective integration of new Christian migrants with existing New Zealand churches? It is certainly not due to a paucity of Christians among the migrants. While considerably more diverse in religious identity than those who arrived in New Zealand from the predominantly Christian Pacific Island nations a generation before, the more recent immigrants from Asian source countries include more Christians than adherents of any other religion.[15] It might be viewed as a failure of hospitality, either of host communities to offer it with sufficient generosity or of migrants to be willing to step out of the relative security of their homogenous group in order to receive it. There are problems, however, with the assumptions encoded within the host/guest relationship. As Averil Bell asserts, "[H]ospitality encompasses a complex and power-laden set of relations between people and place."[16] It is the host who holds power, assumes ownership of the place of meeting, sets the conditions on which the guest might enter and be welcomed and any subsequent relationship might proceed, and controls the mode of relating. The structure of such a relationship impedes its development towards fuller mutuality and the emergence of a new reality.

I want to suggest that the most fruitful way forward in relationship between New Zealand's more established, majority culture churches and those Christian groups that have arrived in the country more recently would be for the established churches not to assume a place at the centre into which to invite guests, but to accept invitations from

13 Berry, "Psychology of Immigration," 616, affirms that, "immigrant-receiving societies and their native-born populations have been massively transformed in the past decades."

14 There is a need for more research to quantify and nuance the anecdotal reporting that most church congregations are less diverse than the communities in which they meet. A significant step forward in this regard is the research conducted by Rev Tokerau Joseph, Minister of First Presbyterian Church, Dunedin, for his thesis entitled, "Ethnic Flames of the Burning Bush: An Exploration of Ethnic Relations in Congregations of the Presbyterian Church in Aotearoa New Zealand" (PhD diss. Otago, 2014)

15 For fuller comment see George M. Wieland, "Christianity: The Surprising 'Asian Religion'," opinion piece on the website of the Asia New Zealand Foundation: http://asianz.org.nz/newsroom/insight/christianity-asian-religion. According to the latest New Zealand census (2013), Asians now comprise over 10% of New Zealand's Catholics and Baptists and almost 10% of Pentecostals and those who describe themselves as "Christian not further defined."

16 Averil Bell, "Being 'At Home' in the Nation: Hospitality and Sovereignty in Talk about Immigration," *Ethnicities* 10 (2010), 236-56, 240, drawing on Derrida's deconstruction of hospitality as an exercise of power.

the margins to enter into liminality with those who are already there.[17] With the risk of liminality comes the promise of *communitas*. This is a "community of the inbetween" that develops uniquely among those who share a common liminal experience. In such companionship relationships, practices and leadership are not predetermined by what any of the participants might have been before entering that liminal space. Chester characterises communitas as "a community of anti-structure whose bond continues even after the liminal period is concluded. A significant sharing of the liminal passage creates strong egalitarian ties which level out differences in status and station which have been established by structure."[18]

It is in such communitas with others in risky liminal space rather than by assimilation or integration into the perceived security of settled existing churches that the potential for transformation may be grasped. What it offers is companionship on the journey into a future that is as yet not fully known, and into a becoming that is not wholly conditioned by what either new migrant or receiving communities might have been before. For New Zealand's churches this need not require an abdication of the responsibilities of a host community to those who arrive as guests but it would relativise the role of host, recognising that all communities of Christian faith are called to self-identify as "aliens and exiles" (2 Pet 2:11). Accordingly they relate to other Christian communities as travellers together across a terrain where neither group dare allow itself to become completely at home (Heb 13:12-14). Among fellow travellers roles of host and guest are fluid and may be interchangeable.[19]

Of course liminality, whether entered from the margins or from the centre, may be resisted. As Hyung Sun Lee observes in relation to the experience of Korean Americans:

> The people at the center are reluctant to give up any power and thus are prone to be protective of the existing social structure. The people on the edge have a hard time facing up to their experience of liminal ambiguity and will often cling to the comfort zones of their ethnic enclaves.[20]

17 In terms of Anthony Gittins' Four Quadrants (ch. 2) this would involve a deliberate relocation from a claimed or assumed place of power among insider participants to the more vulnerable place of outsider participants.

18 Carson, "Liminal Reality," 101.

19 Bell, "Being 'at home,'" 252, writes: "If the roles of host and guest are to offer guidance to the long term relations of migration it must be in this permanently unsettled and oscillating sense, where no-one is forever granted the role of host or forever relegated to the status of guest, whether that be as friends, parasites or charity cases, where all belonging is understood as conditional."

20 Sang Hyun Lee, "Liminality and Worship in the Korean American Context," in *Religion and Spirituality in Korean America*, eds. David K. Woo and Ruth H. Chung (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2008), 100-115, 113.

For that reason the invitation to liminality may not be welcomed, particularly when it is extended from the margins to a perceived centre. This may be when a new migrant group meeting in the premises of a settled church in the migrant-receiving society envisages more mutuality than is provided for in a tenant/landlord or guest/host relationship. Or it may be when the settled church wishes to embark on a journey towards intercultural community that would ask of the migrant group a willingness to step out of the relative security of structures, patterns and relationships that replicate those of their place of origin. But if liminal space is the place of learning and transformation, and carries the promise of communitas in the journey, then for the sake of that which could emerge and for the possibility of liberation from that which impedes our fullest becoming, we might heed Christine Pohl's suggestion, that it "might prove helpful to value more highly those experiences that disorient us and distance us from status and power."[21]

Transformation through Communitas in Liminality: The Case of Peter and Cornelius

Crucial to the narrative and the message of the Book of Acts is the paradigm shift in the stance adopted by the church in Jerusalem to gentiles who were professing faith in Jesus. At the centre of the book's narrative structure is the Council of Jerusalem where that shift was confirmed (15:1-29). Without such a transformation, the second half of the book, and the continuing story of mission and the church through history, would have been very different. As the narrative unfolds leading up to the Council it becomes clear that an important catalyst for the change in the church as a whole is the transformation experienced by one of its key leaders, the apostle Peter, in an episode whose significance is signalled by its repetition. The story itself is told twice (as a third person narrative in 10:1-48 and as Peter's own testimony in 11:1-18) and alluded to a third time in the report of the council (15:14). It is an account of an invitation from the margins to enter liminal space, to discover communitas with others who have entered liminal space from another direction, and to experience there a re-ordering of beliefs, assumptions and values producing radically changed practice.

The outline of the story is well known. It begins in Caesarea, the provincial capital under Roman administration, where Cornelius, a Roman officer, is told in a vision to send for Simon Peter who is in the town of Joppa, about 60 kilometres away (10:1-8). Before the messengers arrive Peter has his own vision, in which he is invited to

21 Christine D. Pohl, "Biblical Issues in Mission and Migration," *Missiology* 31 (2003), 3-15, 10.

eat food that he has always regarded as unclean, protests, and hears the response, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (10:9-16). This prepares Peter to receive the messengers from Cornelius, give them hospitality and then return with them, accompanied by other Jewish believers, to Caesarea (10:17-23). After an awkward start Cornelius and Peter go together into the officer's house where, as Peter is telling the assembled group about Jesus, the Holy Spirit is poured out on them. This convinces Peter that these gentiles should be baptised into the community of followers of Jesus, after which he accepts their hospitality and stays with that household for several days (10:24-48).

For both Cornelius and Peter a state of liminality is precipitated by a divine encounter that requires them to open themselves to new understanding and experience. This in turn impels both of them towards a human encounter that, in its extraordinary circumstances and initial discomfort (10:25-29), throws them together in communitas. In shared vulnerability, they step into what becomes a startlingly new and transforming series of experiences and insights. For Peter the insight comprised not new knowledge but fuller appreciation of what he had already thought that he knew. In the Acts account of the day of Pentecost Peter proclaims that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (2:21). That had been in Jerusalem, at the centre both of Jewish faith and of the early life of the community of believers in Jesus the messiah. Now he is at the margins, geographically at the border of Judean territory, politically at the headquarters of the Roman administration and culturally in a largely gentile environment. It is in this setting, in the company of the gentile Cornelius in whom he is discovering God to be at work, that he exclaims, "I'm really getting it!" (*ep' alētheias katalambanomai*, 10:34).[22]

The learning that takes place in liminal space is theological, experiential and behavioural. The universal scope of God's acceptance (10:34-35), Christ's lordship (10:36) and the offer of forgiveness received by faith (10:43) come into much sharper focus on the margins than they could at the centre of the Jerusalem church's life. The experience of the Spirit in that gentile environment corresponding to the original Pentecost outpouring in Jerusalem (10:44-46) confirms the theological insight and challenges the Jewish believers to enact the truth that they are discerning in baptising their gentile hosts into the name of Jesus Christ and the community of believers (10:47-48). Community is further realised in shared intercultural life as Peter and the

22 The NRSV rendering, "I truly understand," does not convey the force of the present tense katalambanomai here. "I now realize" (NIV) and "I most certainly understand now" (NAS) get closer.

Jewish believers are welcomed into that gentile home, an invitation that, prior to the transformation effected through communitas in liminality, they would have found impossible to accept.[23]

Ross Langmead frequently affirmed – and exemplified – the significance of hospitality in the practice of mission, particularly where it connotes reconciliation. He wrote:

> By living out a new set of relationships counter-culturally, roughly in the shape of God's Commonwealth, we proclaim the possibility of a new creation where love and justice rule and those on the edge are welcomed into the centre.[24]

In this case, however, it is those on the edge who offer hospitality to people from the centre. On their return to that centre, the community of believers in Jerusalem, Peter and his companions are challenged (11:1-3), and the clash of old and new perspectives is exposed. The question asked from the centre about those at the margins is, "What must they do in order to belong with us?" (15:1, 5) The question asked by those who have entered liminal space in communitas with people at the margins is rather, "What must we do to align ourselves with what God is evidently doing among them?" (10:47; 11:17; 15:7-11). The return of the newly transformed Peter and his companions generates a new liminality in the centre itself, that in time proves to be a catalyst for the centre's own transformation in its self-understanding as a people of mission and its orientation towards others (15:13-30).

For the Church in New Zealand: An Invitation from the Margins

The arrival in New Zealand of substantial numbers of immigrants certainly presents New Zealand's churches with the challenge to practice hospitality with glad generosity. At the same time, however, the presence of so many Christian migrants and migrant churches on the edges of New Zealand society represents an opportunity for the transformation of more established congregations. At a time when they and their national church bodies are experiencing dislocation from a remembered or assumed

23 It is notable that the accusation levelled at Peter and his companions by some at the centre, in Jerusalem, was that they had accepted hospitality from and eaten with uncircumcised men (11:3). On the significance of eating together for community formation see Pohl, "Biblical Issues in Mission," 8: "Shared meals, a centerpiece of hospitality, became a key context in which believers worked through issues of social, ethnic, and economic differences, and provided for the poor in their midst. These meals and the practice of hospitality also provided a context within which a new identity and new relationships could be formed and reinforced; young believers were nurtured into a new community, with its particular beliefs and practices, commitments and connections."

24 Ross Langmead, "Transformed Relationships: Reconciliation as the Central Model for Mission," *Mission Studies* 25 (2008), 5-20, 15.

place near the centre of society, with accompanying demoralisation and decline, there comes an invitation from the margins. To respond will mean discomfort and disorientation, but for those who, from the centre, enter that liminal space there will be the joy of communitas with those who have entered it from the edge. In that communitas there is the potential of liberation for both: on one side, from the social exclusion that restricts fullness of life and participation in the new context; on the other, from entrapment in limiting traditions and the illusion of security that inhibit a more authentic pilgrim existence.

In 2009 Ross Langmead generously travelled to Auckland, to lend his considerable mana and encouragement to meetings of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Mission Studies. He presented there a paper entitled, "Contextual Mission: An Australian Perspective," in which he identified the five areas that receive attention in this book. At a number of points, particularly in relation to multicultural realities and what he called "the Asian horizon," Ross invited conversation on how far what he had described resonated with New Zealand contexts. For me there were opportunities, which I deeply valued, to pick up those themes with Ross at a Whitley College conference in 2011 and again at the IAMS conference in Toronto in 2012. In a sense this chapter, presented at the AAMS conference in Adelaide in September, 2014, represents a continuation of that conversation. I am privileged to have the opportunity to offer it here in honour of Ross, and in gratitude for his example of engaged scholarship within an integrated life of faith, community and mission.