

Johann Matthies Plenary talk at Thailand 2017
“God’s Hand in People Movements and the Response of the Church”
Friday, March 10, 2017, AM Session

I hope that we can hear God together and not be carried away by something that is preconceived. I have no idea who gave me this topic, but you will realize that it is close to my heart and my life.

I was reflecting on this last night and remembered that a key scripture is Hebrews 13:14 – “We don’t have an enduring city here, but we live in the search of the one to come.” If you read the verse before that, you’ll see another scripture about Jesus not being part of the camp. [It’s about us] not being in the city and the place where I love to matter, where I have authority, to be recognized, to have influence. We are called to go outside the camp, outside the walls: “let us then go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace that he bore” (Hebrews 13:13). So that resonates with some topics that we’ve already heard here – we don’t bank on becoming the majority voice.

The author of Hebrews is not known, but it could be a Mennonite! I was born in the Soviet Union in an area that isn’t fit for human life – never intended by God to be inhabited. A friend recently visited with me there, and he wrote, “God created central Kazakhstan to illustrate how everything was before anything was!”

When I looked at my neighbors, there was no one indigenous – no one there by choice. Only deportees lived in the city of Karaganda. We shared together the official status of “enemy of the people”. Who? Some Germans, Jews, Crimean Tatars, people from the northern Caucasus, some from Ukraine when borders were moved around and they found people weren’t loyal to the Soviet Union. They all were moved there. Who were my neighbors? Some were Matthies. The first girl I met who was not related to me, I later married.

Does God have something to do with where we all ended up? My mom ended there – she was taken there by train. She had lost her father already. One sister died while they were travelling – she was never properly buried. When people died they were taken off the train so they couldn’t be mixed with the people loyal to the government.

The place was “nowhere”. It was so nowhere it’s where the space program was located later.

When the youngest child of such families turned 7, the parents were taken to the labor camp. This happened to my mom. No relative could take her in. A judge took her in. It was not a sweet childhood, but child labour. She had one sister left, but there was a blizzard and 24 children died, including her sister. That was her childhood.

Her father was living somewhere in hiding with other Turkic people. When Stalin died there was still little choice - people couldn’t move back to their original homes based on ethnicity. We ended up in the northern Caucasus – Kavartian village, filled with Sunni Muslims. The language is one of the most complicated languages on earth. I lived there until I was 13. Then the doors opened and we were able to move on.

For decades there was no church anywhere. But revival came to our people. Early on church leaders were arrested and sent to jail. People thought they were the most unlucky – but later the jails were filled and those arrested were simply executed. So some of these people came out of jail, and my

parents were saved. They started a Mennonite Brethren church in German language with 1100 members.

I am talking about God's hand in this. Actually we have to contend for God's heart in all of this. What a precious gift it is when we notice God's personal attention – when we feel intimate with our Father. But how do we know when he's doing something for us? Well, I know it when something happens and it's an answer to prayer, to a thought, to a longing I haven't shared with anyone; when an event is orchestrated that I couldn't have put together; or when things are out of control.

I heard of a man who urgently needed a parking spot. He prayed, "Help me father, I'm running out of time. Oh, never mind, I found one myself." [That's dumb].

Well, it's even dumber if we look at the things happening on the scale of people movements and we don't pick up that God is behind it. But people don't pick up on it easily. They think this is a [quirk] of history; signs of the times, maybe. Some see evil forces; dark conspiracies. More and more of that around us. But I read in the Bible that this is the hand of God: "You open your hand and satisfy the desire of every creature" (Psalm 145:16). God is in control. Here are a few scriptures I would like to pray with you, regarding God's heart and hand as it concerns the world:

"Lord God, your eyes saw my body even before it was formed. You planned how many days I would live. You wrote down the number of them in your book before I have lived even one of them. You even count every hair on my head so I would not be afraid. From one man you made all the people of the world. You decided exactly when and where we should live. You use your powerful word to hold all things together. You heal those with broken hearts. You take care of all of our wounds. You decide how many stars there should be. You give each one of them a name. Great are you lord. You are mighty." Amen.

Do you see God's hand in your own life? In history? In people movements that are in the news now? Yes. I picked up a flyer from my friend Rob Penner about his project. And the first sentence says "*Migrants Hope* exists to assist the migrants in China now numbering over 300 million people. Having left the village life to seek employment in the cities, the migrant phenomenon has resulted in loss of community." 300 million – just within China!

On this graph we are laying out where the migrants are. 244 million: where are they coming from and going to? The number grows every year. It's not going to end soon. People are being uprooted. How many of you live where your grandparents were born? (*Raise hands*) I see 2. My grandfather spoke in Nebraska at a family event. My father went into the cemetery and found there were 16 children and 16 burial sites. But most people in the Soviet Union don't have gravesites.

Next slide shows refugees: Displaced (eg Kurds who no longer can live where Kurds traditionally live); Refugees (people who can't stay in their own countries). These are numbers from 2015. There will be more in 2016. There are many pushes and pulls to create movement.

Push factors: poverty, famine, racism, violence, discrimination, ecological disaster.

Pull factors: what do people long for?

I recently talked with an Afghani refugee (*in Germany*). Her family has a store in Afghanistan. But as a woman she will have no life in Afghanistan. She said, "I don't need support/finances. But if you can allow me to express myself I can have a life here."

Whoever we meet has quite a story. Let's be sure to meet them to hear it; validate them. They are not just a statistic that they are now [relocated] somewhere else.

Ukraine: a country outside of western Europe I'm most involved in. Each June when we come together for leadership camp, it seems God has a new assignment. In 2014 we were confronted by the fact that our leader John Wiens had died of cancer. As locals we decided we don't need an inspirational speaker. War has begun. We need to meet, to hear one another. We spent three days meeting around the Sermon on the Mount with an open mike allowing Jesus to preach to us. Jesus had powerful things to say to us – including about our enemies. The enemies were no longer a Bible School category; we actually know who they are (*and*) where they are. In this graph you can see over 100,00 lost their homes and church buildings to receive people and shelter them.

But the next year in 2015, God said we had to be present where people suffer most. It led to a relief effort. But that effort led to church planting. Wherever we go we will minister to an existing church to magnify their witness. But over time God was saying there is no church – maybe we are to start a new church. A few months ago we had a celebration in Berdyansk, where the church is released to be an established church. Three weeks ago I was with the brothers in Avdiivka. Here we are in the house of a man who saw World War 2. We think we'll never see such war again. Sometimes our compassion is limited by our intrinsic understanding – “in our part of the world it would be a catastrophe but in their part of their world that's 'normal'”. So we shield ourselves from the force of it. But in their lives, they never saw it coming. Here we see a man has a bullet in his door. His sons have all moved on from there.

In the next slide we have a bit from MCC. Between these elderly people, you see a can of meat with the label “In the name of Christ.” One of the reasons we are here is to unite around the causes of Christ. We have different calls upon our lives and different organizations. But when we unite in the name of Christ people can see we serve the living God. And we have to contend for that – that we work together: MCC, MB Mission, MEDA, and others for transformative mission that will change society.

As we stood in their bullet riddled house, the woman said, last year we had potatoes like cherries – we had to plant so late. It wasn't safe. But nothing is as bad as this. Do you know when this will be over? I said no – she asked me twice. With our pension we can't go and start over.”

This is the picture of their house on Sunday. On Tuesday I left.

And now this is a picture of their house on Wednesday. They survived in the basement. They were taken to church. What is happening? So many Ukrainians have left their homes.

You see here a bag with an inscription (Hebrews 13) – I will never leave you nor forsake you. It has materials paid for by the Washington conference. Thank you. It has something from Gleaners in Winnipeg. If you go back to people there who are cutting vegetables, you can say “Yes your contributions are making it to people who are otherwise more than desperate.

And there is a church plant. We had 35 chairs, and 45 people came. So we stood. Right before I left, the Dresden church said we'll get behind this effort. So I came there with more chairs, and a generator. The reason we do that is not because we can end war, or save people's desperate situations, but we can stand with them, express our relationship and be the presence of God; to be a witness to God who is with people no matter what the circumstances. We have done camps with them. Can you imagine anywhere in the world where the school district asks the church to hold graduation ceremonies for the

kids? And the buses bring children to camp in the name of Jesus. The teachers said, that's the first time I've seen them smile for 3 years. There's an investment that leads to relationships; relationships lead to commitments.

Even the last weeks we discussed evacuating the students. But who do you evacuate? Siblings? Parents? Where? For how long? Then it becomes an agency question, not a relationship question.

Moving to Western Europe – Germany. We have seen migrants like never before. These stats are from 2011: people in Germany – about 3.5 million – come from other countries. When we speak of refugees – you see what a challenge. Millions of people without networks – looking for a different life. What an opportunity. The Lord said: Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another; do not oppress the widow; the fatherless; the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as uniquely born. Love them as yourself.

This is not new guidance to us! This comes from the Torah. This is the heart of God forever!

But we hear a different voice from the press today. I don't know if you can read it. The pope says "We cannot allow the Mediterranean to become a mass graveyard." We have voices of those who do not support search and rescue efforts in the Mediterranean.

In Germany the church is desperate. The visible expression of the church is on decline. When I see a picture of a boat (filled with people) I think of a scripture pointed out by strangers. This is not our interpretation. In Isaiah 61:5 "Strangers will shepherd your flocks. Foreigners will work your land and vineyards." So these people will transform the religious landscape of Germany, of England, of Sweden, of Denmark. The countries we have little hope for if not for something new happening. For Lithuania, maybe.

Let's come back to the Chechens. Have you ever seen this man? He's infamous as the "minister of war" of ISIS. Named Amar. He's Chechen; he grew up in Georgia. He was a soldier. Fought in wars. Got completely disillusioned. Joined ISIS. Became their top military authority. He was killed by a US air force strike last summer. Connected to the most ruthless things. Next picture: that's his brother! His name is T**r. He sent you greetings this morning in the name of Christ!!

When you see these men – they grew up in the same home. I saw T**r last week in Turkey. He said we were so close as brothers, my mother didn't even separate our underwear. Today he's the pastor of the House of Prayer for All Nations. We could say there's an illustration of Jesus bringing a sword to the family. Where Jesus enters, there may be disunity, like here. The family spit on T**r and kicked him. He said "I love you because I know you do this out of concern for me, so that I won't be lost from the path of Allah." They said, "Because you love us, you are still alive." And T**r talked with me about a vision that he has, to find 500 people who will be able to say something good about Muslims. His brother who is now dead, assumed there is no one – that all committed Christians hate Muslims. He was sure of that. This is the principle he operated on, and assumed it's mutual.

But hate breeds hate, and violence multiplies.

Are there people who love Muslims; who can say good things about them? T**r hopes to have a series on YouTube in hopes that 5 testimonies will be strong enough to go viral and reach them.

Here we are in my house. A Kurdish family is here, from Syria. The father lived in Germany by himself for 2 years before his family joined. There is probably no church in Germany left that has not experienced a refugee coming to visit....Let me go to 2 more places just to show you how God moves in all of this.

Central Asia – this is where I was born. While I was a student in Fresno California, I started going back to my home, planting a church. They invited me now to their 25th anniversary as a church planter. It didn't happen because in Fresno, I found out somehow about the 'least reached' or the 10-40 window, or because Hans Kasdorf was my missions professor. It happened because God redeemed my history. I spoke the language! I cared. I knew the people. My parents were healed. They blessed this; they gave their best to this. Maybe more did.

This is 1991 – next we're dedicating a church building in the Caucasus. God redeemed my migration story. I was sent back to this area by another agency to an area I lived as a school kid.

In my neighborhood in Germany where I live, Ador Giesbrecht lost touch with all his relatives when they were deported. He grew up with a Kyrgyz family – for a long time he thought he was Kyrgyz. After a long time, he got reconnected. Kyrgyz was his mother tongue. Now he was in Germany, and all his livelihood was German, but he had a Kyrgyz heart in him, and the Kyrgyz language. He became the Bible translator for the Kyrgyz.

I could share so much more. Let me end by saying, we are not left alone in this world. We don't have to face alienation and helplessness. The world is not spinning out of control. How will this all end? Well, with the return of Christ and the establishment of his kingdom.

And it is already implanted in many places. We are not bystanders; we are salt and light. We are not without tools; without approaches. In all this the Holy Spirit leads us. We have guidance in our international family, and we know the heart of God.

Sometimes its easy to dismiss prayer as a pious platitude – but we are told it's our top priority. This will transform the world – when we pray for people in authority. I'm not in political structure, but since I'm on the board of the German evangelical alliance, we do link into some government structures. I spent three days in Berlin recently – we spoke to politicians who are not believers. They were basically saying, for some reason in our time our reputation is below that of pimps. And it filled my heart with sorrow because I also think that Christians are part of this....talking down and not lifting up; not being a light, salt and prayer force in our societies. We have the power of truth; God's truth has the power to knock everything down. As we have seen the power of communism fall, we will see other constructions of lies fall. I will dare to say in this environment that we pray for the whole construction of Islam to collapse. It will never be defeated, but it will collapse through the truth of God; the power of God. We have the power of example. We don't have better arguments. If we are carriers of God we are examples that people can touch – transformed realities; transformed communities, in a solidarity.

I'll read a little sentence from an American sociologist: (forgive me for this – it's not scripture) "We should not underestimate the significance of a small group of people who have a vision of a just and gentle world. The quality of a whole culture may be changed when only 2 percent of its people have a new vision." If you add to the 2 percent the power of the living God then you know we're not addressing lost causes; that we are on to something! That we are welcome as God's agents in this world.

I will stop here because we want to share with each other your experiences and your life lines. How is God redeeming your history?