



STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND

Can you imagine what it must be like for people starting from scratch, trying to find a job but not having the language or the necessary paperwork?

I remember when I recently moved from one country to another and how I felt very weary during my first few months. I had been working in another European country for years, and had assumed I would be able to claim unemployment benefit whilst I looked for work, but the system proved very laborious, and after months of form-filling, I was refused. I had a university degree, but struggled to find a suitable full-time job. I felt that I spent days and weeks going round in circles and had nothing to show for it. On top of all that, I was missing my life and friends back home, and there were lots of things about my new country that were strange to me, but which the locals accepted unquestioningly. For them, I was the strange one.

And all that was just moving back to my native country of Scotland!

Can you imagine what it must be like for people starting from scratch, trying to find a job but not having the language or the necessary paperwork? How to find your way around and use public transport, when the signs are all written in a foreign language, perhaps even a different script? How to find accommodation and have an assurance that your landlord is not taking advantage of you?

Once immigrants have got through the first survival period, it can still be very difficult to integrate. There can be lots of misunderstandings and prejudices between the locals and the immigrants. (I was once complimented by an old man on how well I spoke the local language. This happened in Glasgow, the town I was born and bred in, but I have a Pakistani father, and so may

look foreign to some.) The newcomers may well feel torn. On the one hand, they might miss their country of origin, and want to be with people from 'home'. On the other hand, if they want to integrate into their new country, they need to look ahead, try to adapt to the new culture, and make new friends.

So how can we respond? We can greet our foreign neighbours, listen and learn about them; share that we are followers of Jesus, and show how this makes a difference to how we live our lives. In Spain, I was a volunteer in a Christian organisation for immigrants. They help with paperwork and any everyday problems that come along, such as doctors' visits. There are computer and language classes for men and women. All this is not only of practical help, but it also improves their self-esteem and most importantly, allows them to experience God's love. Although they may feel that many ignore or even look down on them, God sees and values them. Opportunities often come up in class to share about God and our relationship with Him. It's a place where they can see God's diverse family in action, as the multinational Christian team loves and serves them together. It's also where all of us learn to appreciate new neighbours, and where bridges are built. That's why the organisation in Spain is called 'El Puente', the Bridge.

How many examples can you think of in the Bible of people who were on the move? From Adam and Eve outcast from Eden, to the persecution and scattering of the first Christians from Jerusalem, it seems that God uses these times to work in our lives, make us seek more of him, and further his work. I myself became a Christian whilst living abroad, away from my old everyday routine. There are wonderful opportunities as we have more freedom to share openly in the West about Jesus, and immigrants are perhaps more open to considering other beliefs. Now the mission field is on our doorstep. ■

Catherine (not pictured; will be working amongst North Africans in Spain)

