

# Episode 189 *Eight Million Exiles* with Christopher M. Hays

*This transcript has been edited for clarity and space.*

## **Christopher Hays**

My name is Christopher M. Hayes. I'm the President of Scholar Leaders.

## **David Capes**

Dr. Christopher M. Hayes. Good to see you. Welcome to *The Stone Chapel Podcasts*.

## **Christopher Hays**

It is really nice to be back.

## **David Capes**

Well, it's good to have you here at the library and see you face to face. For those who don't know who Christopher Hays is, who is he?

## **Christopher Hays**

Well, I am a mediocre salsa dancer and an amateur woodworker. I'm slightly less amateur at New Testament studies. I'm a New Testament scholar. I was a missionary in Colombia in the city of Medellin for eight years. And then moved back to the United States a couple of years ago to work with the ministry of Scholar Leaders. I'm married to Michelle and I have three kids: Zoey, Asher and Judah.

## **David Capes**

You did your PhD at Oxford University. And who did you work with at Oxford?

## **Christopher Hays**

I worked with Markus Bockmuehl.

## **David Capes**

You've written an important book called *Eight Million Exiles: Missional Action Research and the Crisis of Forced Migration*. What you looked at in Colombia for those many years was forced, violent, exile away from people's homes. You were the director of the Faith and Displacement Project. Tell us about that project.

## **Christopher Hays**

Yes, and thanks for the opportunity to talk about it. When I first got to Colombia, I didn't know the word displacement in Spanish or in English. This is 2013 so it was before the big Syrian refugee crisis had

really dawned on our western consciousness. And even in the seminary where I worked, we didn't have an understanding of how big the problem was.

But Colombia has been for three generations in a state of vicious, internal war, between Marxist guerrillas and right-wing paramilitary groups. It's been fueled by mafia and narcotics money. And the government's hands aren't clean in all of this. And as a result, you've had this perpetual violent churn across the country. And the casualties of this have been huge populations that have been driven from their homes. Just since the year 2000 more than eight million Colombians have been driven from their homes by the violent conflict.

**David Capes**

Wow! That many in the last 24 years. And this is a conflict that has been going on for 50 years or so?

**Christopher Hays**

It's more like 75 years.

**David Capes**

Seriously? It's like a civil war.

**Christopher Hays**

It is; but imagine a civil war with a dozen different armies that are in constantly shifting alliances. And if you try to knock out one act, another one pops up in its spot. So those eight million exiles, as the book refers to, are actually epiphenomenal in that they are a consequence of the more than one million homicides that have happened in that same period of time.

And to give you an idea of the scale, the population of Costa Rica, the entire nation is four million people. You're talking about the forced displacement of two Costa Rica's in the past generation in Colombia, and the consequences of this are multi-sectoral and utterly debilitating. You're talking about massive, extreme poverty, huge psychological trauma, and family dismemberment. People have obviously been politically disenfranchised; their social tissue is destroyed. And their view of God is crippled by this crisis.

**David Capes**

Because there are a lot of charlatans in religion out there, too. I've read about some of those in your book.

**Christopher Hays**

Absolutely. And what we realized is that these exiles were among our students at the seminary. They were in our churches; they were amongst our alumni. This crisis of internal displacement in Colombia is the biggest humanitarian crisis you've never heard of. And as a seminary, it began to dawn on us that if we wanted to do theology that matters, there was no better place for us to focus our attention than on this. And so, it was in response to this massive humanitarian crisis that we birthed, what became *fe y desplazamiento*, faith and displacement.

**David Capes**

So finally you're at that point where you had to learn the Spanish word for "displacement."

**Christopher Hays**

I did. There was a fair bit of discrete fumbling under the table to look at my phone and try to figure out what the words were.

**David Capes**

When you think about the scale of this, you're just one seminary and it's not a big seminary. It's just an average sized seminary for Colombia. Where did all these people go? I mean, did they stay in Colombia? Or did they go to Venezuela? Did they go to Panama? Where do they go?

**Christopher Hays**

Well, you may know the phrase internal displacement, forced internal displacement. These people by definition are called Internally Displaced Persons or IDPs. That means they're basically refugees within their own national borders, which has this particularly nefarious consequence to it. Which is that if you're a refugee, there's a UN category, there's money, there's international resources. But if you're an IDP, if you're a displaced person internally, you're just left to depend on your own resources, or government resources. And the government is notoriously underfunded, under capable and very often corrupt.

But there is this enormous resource that can reach further than the government can, that reaches further than the UN can. And this the local Christian church. And one of the things that we realized is that if God has a plan to foster the shalom of victims of violent conflict, his plan is going to go through the local church.

**David Capes**

Shalom being the Hebrew word for "peace." And not just absence of conflict, but welfare.

**Christopher Hays**

Yes, holistic wellness too.

**David Capes**

A lot of folks have not heard the term "integral mission" in English. That's a term that you often hear in relationship to Latin American churches, that have taken seriously that people are not just one dimensional. That there's a mental side, there's a physical side, their physical needs that must be met, and all of it needs to be addressed.

**Christopher Hays**

Yes. *missio integral*, integral mission is probably the signet, the crowning contribution of Latin American evangelicalism from the 20th century to the world of theology. It's a mission, it's a theology of what the church's task in the world is. It says that if God is King of all of creation, and is making all things new, then we're not going to bifurcate between people's souls and bodies. We're going to recognize that the souls that God loves, He created to be in bodies and communities and nations and contexts that God

loves and that God is King of. When we pray, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, it's because the things on Earth are places where God's will needs to be done. That God cares about all of this, and that God's mechanism for doing the work of the Holy Spirit in the world is the body of Christ. It's the local church.

When we began to form The Faith and Displacement Project, we pulled together two key Latin American theories. One of which was the theological theory of integral mission. And we said, if we want to mobilize churches, to help foster the holistic recovery of IDPs, of internally displaced persons, we're going to use integral mission as this key framework. Because we need to make sure that the churches are helping these people recover spiritually, psychologically, economically, socially. We've got to help the churches to look at the whole person. So that's why integral mission became one of the two key theories for this book.

### **David Capes**

Well, one of the things about the process that you developed was the inclusion of people who are not theologians. Who are not necessarily pastors, but they're involved in social science. They're involved in economics and involved in a lot of other aspects of human flourishing. How did that come together? Who did you choose to work with? Who are your partners in all of this?

### **Christopher Hays**

We had this extraordinary team. We ended up pulling together, over 35 scholars from four different continents, scholars and professionals, let me be very clear about that. And they were scholars working with expertise in all the areas of human suffering, those most aggravated are generated by displacement. We had people looking at economics, psychology, sociology, politics, missiology. Because it's about moving the mission of the church and pedagogy because it's about how do you educate people to engage them around these issues.

I had six teams around those six issues, and each team had a mixture of theologians and social scientists. But we also had academics as well as professionals who would help us land our work in concrete action. And then on top of that, we had 13 co-researchers, who either themselves were survivors of forced displacement, or local ministers who had ministries that were in some way or another exemplary to IDPs. And together then we created this project that used cutting edge theological and empirical social scientific research in order to create content to mobilize local Christian professionals in their local church. As part of their own local mission to foster the recovery of these internally displaced persons. It's high level research being applied to local Christian communities to help them realize their own mission.

### **David Capes**

The term that you use over and over and is on the jacket of your book is "missional action research and crisis of forced migrations". So missional action research. This research ended up creating avenues for these people to be reached. And the local churches were very important in that.

### **Christopher Hays**

The local churches are the actors that matter for this project. We wanted to help the church to be the church, which is what theology is supposed to do.

**David Capes**

All this sounds very expensive. How did you get this funded?

**Christopher Hays**

We were really blessed by the enthusiastic support of the Templeton World Charity Foundation, TWCF. They developed a relationship with the then director of TWCF, Andrew Briggs who was a professor of materials at Oxford. And while I was doing my postdoc at Oxford, he invited me on a couple of occasions to think about making a proposal to TWCF. For research. And you and I are both academics. We're nerds. We know that getting to do a research proposal to a big foundation is a game changer for you professionally. But I knew I was supposed to be a missionary in Latin America. I kept saying I'd love to, but I can't start a big research project. I'm supposed to figure out what matters for Colombia. And I don't know, I'm not there yet.

But then, we started doing this work with displacement, and Andrew was kind enough to inquire again, if we might put together a proposal. I thought, I do actually know what it would look like to do good research for Columbia. And they encouraged us to dream big, to think about what it would look like to do the project right. Not what do you think you can get money for? And as a fundraising missionary, that was a very weird move for me to think what it will look like to do it right. And so we put together the project. And then Templeton came in for three years and funded it. And then we did another three years after the first three years that showed us that what we were doing worked. We did another three years to scale it up tenfold across the country. And Templeton along with a number of other foundations came in to make sure the work was possible for us. And it was a gift to the seminary and to the church. And it was transformative for those of us who were the scholars working on the project.

**David Capes**

I started to say, all those who benefited from that. All those students that were at the Biblical Seminary in Colombia, clearly understood, they had to pick it up, they had to catch what was going on.

**Christopher Hays**

You know, that one of the real joys for me was when I realized the disappearance of a phrase from the seminary's vocabulary. When I arrived at the seminary, I heard a little line, a little jab that works in English too, which is that the seminary is a cemetery. Because we have this idea, that you go to seminary, and you get book learning, and then it kills your soul. And I heard this from the students, and it really grieved me. And then The Faith and Displacement Project emerged. And the students participated in the research, they piloted materials with us, they helped in all these different avenues of the project. They created original art and music. I mean, it was this beautiful experience. I supervised four student theses out of this. I realized about five years in, it's been a long time since I've heard anybody say the seminaries are a cemetery.

**David Capes**

The ideal audience, the ideal reader for your book, who is that?

**Christopher Hays**

You know, it is written very intentionally to be a benefit to anybody with a fundamental level of theological education. If you're an undergrad in theology, you can get this book really well. If you're a pastor, you're going to get this book. One of the things that we did that was unconventional with the book, and that I am happy about how it turned out is it's not strict work of New Testament studies. It combines New Testament studies, with social sciences, with a whole bunch of first-person narrative.

**David Capes**

A lot of stories here that are just heartbreaking. When you read them.

**Christopher Hays**

Yes, and there are testimonies interwoven between each chapter. We call them biographical vignettes of people who have lived either the experience of being a victim of violent conflict or wading into ministry amidst these communities. But we wanted the voices of the people who shaped our project, the survivor voices who we worked into our teams as part of the content creation, to be brought into the story throughout.

And we also had a more profound theological commitment in this book, which is the belief that the Holy Spirit uses human experience to reveal further depths of the will of God to us. It's one side of the Wesleyan quadrilateral, right? We believe that God uses human experience to reveal God's will. So, we thought, well, if we believe that, then we need to include the human experience in the story, because that's part of how God has revealed God's help to us. And I think one of the upshots of it is, it makes it a fun book to read.

**David Capes**

Are churches, now, having been through this experience, are they better equipped to handle what's happening? Are they continuing it? As we are doing this podcast now, Russia is invading the Ukraine. A lot of people have been displaced internally. But also, they've gone to other countries. Is what you learned here, usable, portable to that particular place.

**Christopher Hays**

I think they are. This is one of the encouraging things about this project. It was designed to help churches create a locally sustainable ministry to IDP's that become part of the ongoing life of the church. And in particular, that become opportunities for professionals in the church to put their professional skills to work at the service of the ministry of the people of God. Because so often in Latin America, as well as in North America, if you're not the sort of person who can lead a Bible study or sing in the choir, or in the worship band, you don't have much to do on Sunday. And so you have a bunch of lawyers and teachers and mental health professionals and business people who have these gifts the Columbian church and the world needs. We just helped the church to mobilize them.

And then the idea was that the churches would each create these local perpetual faith and displacement ministries. Or they are perpetual, as long as there are still displaced people.

You know one of the great encouragements as I shifted from working with the Biblical Seminary of Colombia to working with Scholar Leaders was seeing the way in which the experience of Colombian theologians and the theories developed there could be beneficial to theological leaders in Ukraine.

We did help resource a network of seminary presidents and some of their staff to apply some of these methods. In particular to apply the utilization of empirical social scientific research to pressing new pastoral issues and their context issues. Like how you pastor these enormous waves of veteran amputees that this war has generated There's 300,000, new amputees in Ukraine since the war started. And they're in the churches but the churches don't know how to deal with the physical or the psychological trauma of this. These churches are in old Soviet buildings without a single wheelchair ramp. They don't know how to physically get the people into the building. But this is a major part of their pastoral obligation now.

And so, these seminary leaders are combining insights from social scientists and from psychology. They're doing new original field research, pulling in their own theological insights, and then wrapping it all up into content that's designed for training, pastors, and chaplains. It's content that's designed to help mobilize the churches to respond. That's just one of three topics that these guys are working on using lessons that were developed in Colombia. And that's one of the things that Scholar Leaders is committed to: that the global church, indeed not exclusive but certainly outside the West, is one of our biggest resources for the world. And we want to foster lots of interchange between theologians outside of the West, because those of us who live in the relative peace and safety of the West haven't had to grapple with issues like violence or invasion in the same way that these other Christians have. But there's a lot that a Christian in Nigeria or in Palestine can say to a Christian in Ukraine, and it's going to hold a lot more weight than if somebody from the comfort of an American suburb says it.

### **David Capes**

We're talking to Christopher M. Hayes about his book *Eight Million Exiles: Missional Action Research and the Crisis of Forced Migration*. It's an important book. It's a key book. And I would love to see this book being taught in the seminaries to help pastors even in the West, understand what integral mission looks like in these extreme situations. Dr. Christopher Hayes thanks for being with us today on *The Stone Chapel Podcasts*.

### **Christopher Hays**

It's been a delight. Thank you for having me.