

Spiritual wanderlust: Genesis 12:1-4

by [Wilma Ann Bailey](#) in the [February 12, 2008](#) issue

The urge to travel is in Abraham's genes. According to Genesis 11, his father, Terah, uprooted the family from the southern Mesopotamian town of Ur and headed north to Haran. He intended to lead the family all the way to Canaan, but when he died in Haran a portion of the family settled there. Abram hears the voice of YHWH speaking to him, telling him that for his own sake he must leave three things: his land, his birthplace and the house of his father.

In ancient times, it was unusual for the firstborn to leave. The pattern was for a younger son (Jacob, Joseph) to go while the firstborn son stayed home, charged with care of aging parents and unmarried younger siblings. That is why the reader is told that Abram's father died, a brother died, and another brother is married and therefore an adult. Abram can leave with his integrity intact. One assumes that Abram's mother died before her husband. It would have been enough to instruct Abram to go to another place or to fulfill the dream of his father by reaching Canaan and settling there. Instead there is that threefold statement of what Abram is to leave behind.

In ancient societies, place and relationships were the most important considerations. One's home and network of family and friends provided support and a means of earning a living. Without the political and economic structures that are in place today, travel beyond one's homeland was difficult and dangerous; there were no rules that one could count on and no embassy to call if one got into trouble. In more recent times, people often leave bad situations—war; famine; political, economic, social or religious oppression—and go to a place where they hope their lives will be better.

Interestingly enough, Abram is not promised that life will be better in Canaan. He is told that his name will become great, that he will be made into a great people (*goy*) and that he will be a blessing, but not that he will be materially better off. Actually it's almost guaranteed that at first—when he's left behind his known language of communication, his reputation, his kin network, his knowledge of a place and how to survive in it—life will be worse.

Abram is being called to father a new way of thinking, a new religious expression and a new people. He's told to leave behind land, birthplace and the house of his father—all the things that make it difficult to do something new—because otherwise he can too easily say, "But this is the way we have always done it." Perhaps a new perspective will emerge only if he is exposed to a new environment in which old patterns no longer work.

The growth of denominations, congregations and independent churches that have muted or even severed their original denominational ties may represent a desire of some believers to have a say in the life of their religious institutions. Some want to envision God and spiritual life differently and get away from "This is the way we have always done it" thinking.

These churches are usually full of young and early-middle-aged adults, some of whom feel alienated from their congregations and denominations of origin because they "were not heard," or were denied leadership opportunities, or were discouraged when innovations that they proposed were rejected. This has been particularly true of the young, of women and of people from racially, ethnically and linguistically diverse communities. Denominations make utopian statements about their openness to all, but the lived reality is different.

It is easy to blame the inherent sinfulness of people, the desire to hold on to power and the unwillingness of people to change. This is at least partially because people have spent their whole lives learning about how the society in which they live functions—including the church—and how to find a place for themselves in it. They were told growing up that "this is the way to behave in church . . . this is the kind of music that is acceptable in church . . . this is the way the church is organized." Then those same churches (denominations) tell them that what the churches said in the past is not true. This is interpreted as betrayal, not enlightenment.

Some congregations and denominations have not adequately dealt with the resistance to change by educating older people and persuading them that they are still loved and have a place in the church. These congregations have not provided enough opportunities for younger people and persons representing diversity to have not just a voice but also the power to make new things happen.

The church ought to evolve as its own understanding of the gospel becomes clearer. But it's hard to change. That's why some people move away from their spiritual homeland, their spiritual birthplace and the spiritual house of their ancestors.